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Developing sustainable pedagogic models in a turbulent environment (0026)

In this paper, I discuss the importance of sustainable, flexible pedagogic models of course design which are versatile enough to cater for the turbulent environment of changing students, changing content and changing technologies in higher education.

A changing environment

A new generation of student learners, characterised by digital literacy has been noted by several authors in the education literature (e.g., Matulich, Papp and Haytko, 2008; Wymbs, 2011). A generation of students brought up on the internet, social media and sophisticated mobile technologies has been categorised as "Digital Natives" and "NetGen learners" (Prensky, 2001, cited by Matulich et al., 2008). We hear of students who typically do not respond well to a traditional lecture style format (Matulich et al., 2008) and who are apparently no longer prepared to spend hours reading lengthy book chapters. Claims that students have brains that are "wired differently" have led to proposals that educators need to re-consider delivery methods to accommodate this new generation of learners (Matulich et al., 2008). As many of today's students have experienced a school education which has embraced technology, (Drea, Tripp, and Stuenkel, 2005) their expectations for higher education are indeed likely to include many non-traditional teaching methods.

In addition to changing students, we are also seeing the impact of technological change on research tools. Whilst electronic databases have been the norm for several years, we are now seeing social media tools used in research. For example, in applied subjects such as business, an understanding of current practice is vital; often the quickest way to find out about new initiatives is via topical blogs, discussion groups and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Finally, for many applied courses, the content of a curriculum is constantly changing as practitioners embrace new technologies and we see textbooks become outdated almost as

they are published, This is particularly true in subjects such as marketing where traditional theoretical models are being revisited and updated on a regular basis.

The challenge for educators in such a turbulent environment is to develop sustainable, flexible pedagogic models which are engaging, relevant and up to date.

A flexible, sustainable approach to course design

My proposal is that educators need to develop their own pedagogic models which are flexible enough to accommodate change from one year to the next. Instead of a focus on content and developing lectures which cover new subject ground, we should develop pedagogic models which ensure that students themselves collaborate in the development of new knowledge, making full use of new research tools. By investing time in developing engaging, collaborative sessions, we can decide at a later stage the actual subject matter. We can also be flexible in the research tools used to develop the new knowledge base.

Bird's (2007) "3 C's" model for course design focuses on Content, Knowledge Construction and Consolidation. Whilst acknowledging the importance of all three aspects, in my proposal, content takes second place to knowledge construction in that the focus of the design is on the collaborative techniques which ensure students are given responsibility for developing new knowledge, using both traditional and more recent research tools with which they are familiar.

At the heart of this proposal is a social constructivist approach to learning which entrusts much of the knowledge construction of a course to the students, with an emphasis on active learners and social interaction (Bird, 2007).

A practical example of knowledge construction

In my own subject area, marketing communications, the subject matter is changing almost on a daily basis as brands are advertised and promoted on the latest digital platforms and new media. Whilst I see it as my responsibility to keep up to date, I also see the value in encouraging the students to explore current practice and to share that knowledge with peers. To ensure this happens, my own pedagogic model includes "Experts and Novices", an approach which involves nominating some students as "experts" and some as "novices"

during specified sessions. "Experts" are those students who have completed in-depth reading of five journal articles on a given topic, whilst "novices" have just read a nominated chapter from a course text. The "experts" are then responsible for briefing the "novices" on the topic during the session. The structure of the sessions is something that has to be carefully planned, but once done is sustainable across a number of courses and over time. However, the content matter or the topics can change according to emerging topic areas. Again using the marketing communications course as an example, this year will see the students exploring mobile marketing, viral marketing and product placement in the "Experts and Novices" sessions. All three of these topics are currently evolving and we are seeing new research on a regular basis. As these topics are replaced by others, rather than having to totally revisit the content of my course, I will be able to simply replace the topics of the "Experts and Novices" sessions. Other techniques include class debates with students having to access current literature and cases on a given topic, again which can change from year to year. In terms of the research tools used to gather this new knowledge, students can be briefed to use both traditional and appropriate new methods, reflecting on their use as part of assessed coursework, ensuring that they are using current resources.

So, what is new?

I am not claiming that any of these individual pedagogic techniques are new. What I am proposing is that course design should start with the pedagogic plan over which the content can then be overlaid. The pedagogic plan should include techniques which require collaboration, use of new research tools, shared learning and a move away from the educator as owner of knowledge to a fully collaborative approach.

References

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