

THE POWER OF CONNECTION: SHARING EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO REACH BEYOND KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL ACQUISITION IN AN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The profiles of today's adult learners in higher education are complex and diverse. Supporting these students in their learning journey needs to go beyond the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities requiring a paradigm shift in pedagogical approach. In this paper, two tertiary educators from a regional Australian university share how they support adult learners enrolled both locally and globally to connect effectively with course content and with each other. One author, working primarily in undergraduate education courses has proposed a "Winning Formula" approach to her pedagogy with an emphasis on student engagement, contextualised learning and choice of learning resources. The second author who works online with postgraduate learners shares outcomes of her research in online design with a focus on the principle of the "CHE factor" (qualities of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy) which she has found is the central tenet of effective online learning and teaching. As a result of a categorical analysis of multiple data sources from their individual research activities, the two authors were able to identify a number of shared learning and teaching principles which they have found support learners in making connections between their learning and the real world environments in which they live and work. Principles, however, cannot exist in a vacuum and need to be considered according to the educational contexts within which they are applied. The authors critique these key principles and the application to their own teaching contexts and share some anecdotal comments from students. The paper concludes with an invitation to others to consider the application (and possible adaptation) of the principles to their own educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

Connection, higher education, context, adult learner, real world environment, learning

INTRODUCTION

The fabric of higher education in Australia and internationally has become more diverse. Not only is there a rise in female and mature aged student enrolments, but improved accessibility due to online technology and the enhancement of distance education materials mean that geographic location, socio-economic status and cultural background are becoming less of a barrier for accessing and pursuing a tertiary education. Further to this, the globalisation of universities and the growing external market as well as flexibility of learning and enrolment arrangements mean that locally, nationally and globally, students are enrolling from a range

of contexts (a unique set of conditions or circumstances that operate on or are embedded in the life of an individual, group, a situation, event that gives meaning to its interpretation) (Brown, 2008; Lawrence, Jill, 2006; Oers, 1997). To not acknowledge, support and value the contextual and diverse richness of students' learning, personal circumstances as well as their innate ability and efforts is to teach with 'blinkers on' (Brown, 2009).

In order to ensure both sustainability of higher education, excellence in learning and teaching as well as equitable opportunity for all students, institutions are recognising that they need move beyond a focus on just maintaining optimum enrolments to reconceptualising and re-examining pedagogical positions and practices (Santiago, 2008). It requires a renewed focus on student learning, in particular those processes that are in place to support, communicate and educate students for optimum learning outcomes (Dashwood, Lawrence, Brown, & Burton, 2008). At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), this shift in focus is evident in the mission statement where USQ aims to provide "quality professional education opportunities that are accessible, flexible and borderless" (University of Southern Queensland, 2008). In the USQ key organisational goals, the focus is on "enhancing teaching performance and to provide high quality, flexible and inclusive learning experiences that promote lifelong learning, critical enquiry and students' career opportunities".

In this paper, two USQ educators share their distinct yet pedagogically similar learner-centred approaches to supporting their students to make connections between their learning, each other and the real world contexts in which they live and work. The authors also discuss the process of how they made these comparisons and how the emerging principles they have defined may be applied to other educational contexts.

THE WINNING FORMULA

It is important that an effective approach to adult education and learning be based on sound pedagogical principles that underpin course development, teaching and support (Danaher, 2001). Further to this, a supportive learning and teaching environment (whether students are studying on campus or externally) needs to be strategically structured and nurtured (Reushle, 2005). The Winning Formula (Brown, 2008a) is Author 1's attempt to respond to the changing needs and expectations of students whilst also exploring how students learn and the outcomes of student learning in tertiary education. The Winning Formula is the name given to both a unique approach to supporting, motivating and enhancing the student learning journey as well as a motivating Breeze presentation (PowerPoint supported by audio) that is a lynch pin or gateway for students commencing the courses facilitated by Author 1. The Winning Formula challenges the view that learning is just acquiring knowledge, skills and outcomes and instead provides a pedagogical approach that values contextualisation and ensures students feel connected and part of a team of learners.

The framework is a conscious shift from an instructional focus to a learning paradigm that ensures course materials support the individual and multiple learning styles. This is achieved by offering a smorgasbord of resources from which students can select to help connect and engage with a course. This approach offers maximum resource flexibility including online materials, Breeze and Camtasia (video capture) presentations, podcasts and online discussion forums to back up hard copy and online study materials. The Winning Formula Powerpoint presentation is added to the online course environments at the beginning of each semester and used as an ice-breaker to set the scene, provides a critical step in assuring students that they

are supported and valued and helps make explicit the roles of all parties in ensuring that the course is productive, meaningful and engaging. This paper focuses on two of the four principles that help to facilitate the shift towards a new learning and teaching paradigm. These are: the importance of contextual application and relevancy; and the provision of resources to suit a range of learning styles to motivate students to engage with course content, concepts and each other.

A Refocusing of Learning Paradigms in Higher Education

Contextualised Application and Relevance

It is understood that a critical aspect of support to students' learning and engagement is ensuring that materials are delivered in ways that students perceive have relevancy to their context and where their cultural attributes are acknowledged (Kuh, Nelson Laird, & Umbach, 2004; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003). Author 1's approach to teaching is underpinned by the belief that context gives meaning to learning and that skills and knowledge are most effective when students engage in relevant and meaningful tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Contextualised learning and teaching is then a strength-based paradigm that acknowledges the richness of multiple contexts, backgrounds, understandings and perspectives in a learning environment (Elson-Green, 2007). The Winning Formula reinforces that whether a student is local to Toowoomba, from elsewhere in Australia, overseas in Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Brunei, Dubai or Canada, the course offers students a range of open-ended materials and processes encouraging them to make connections between the study materials and their own situation as well as share details of their context with others. Course materials ensure relevancy and incorporate sustainable principles that clearly demonstrate links between theory and the real world applications (Lawrence, J, 2006; Rickford, 2005).

The Winning Formula reflects Author 1's aim of ensuring that the content of a course is specific enough to meet the course objectives whilst flexible enough to enable multiple contextual applications. It encourages students to continually ask themselves "What does this content and theory mean to me and how can I use it in my context?" Examples of this include integrating regular forum topics where students are encouraged to share their context with the group as well as directly linking a forum question into course materials requiring students to reflect and apply content to their context. Another example of contextual application is the integration of a range of students' work or exemplars throughout the course materials. This can be including a sample of a past student's forum posting, or part of a student's response to an assessment piece as an exemplar for other students to view. Students also appreciate the inclusion of a reading, interview, video clip, newspaper article or piece of text from a range of cultural and social contexts as well as other real world examples. This acknowledges the complex relationship between globalisation and education as well as considering the cultural, political, sociological and philosophical perspectives of students and the educator (Freeman, 1998).

Provision of Resources to Motivate Student Engagement

Just as a chameleon changes its colour to suit its environment, so too is it important to ensure resources and information shared in a course are relevant to students of different learning styles, circumstances and contexts. Some students enjoy reading from hard copy materials and study modules; some prefer multi-media and audio presentations; others favour a more 'lecture style' power point presentation, whilst some benefit from collaborating and critically reflecting on concepts and understandings with others. The Winning Formula, based on

constructivist principles, supports the view that it is important that the information shared and discussed ‘comes alive’ for students - motivating students to construct their own knowledge and become actively involved in the process of meaning making (Hung, 2001). It is important that students see the information offered in the course as more than just something that matters for fulfilling assessment requirements but come away with real strategies and tools that can be used in multiple applications.

The challenge for educators is to ensure that the range of materials and resources presented offers students the ability to choose and connect with information that resonates and is relevant to them (a ‘tool box of ideas’) whilst ensuring they graduate with sound and current work-based knowledge. An example of this tool-box of ideas is in a pre-service course focusing on physical activity for young children. The course incorporates resources that help students make connections with course content by including personally designed videos on infant massage, parachute play, balloon play, relaxation methods and activities to support diversity (just to name a few). Other popular resources are podcasts, radio interviews and episodes of interesting television programs used to highlight a particular issue or share an interesting perspective.

THE CHE FACTOR

The design principle of the CHE factor grew out of a study conducted by Author 2 as part of her doctoral research (Reushle, 2005). Over a 2-year period, the author collaborated with two groups of teachers from a polytechnic in Singapore to build the capacity of the groups in designing for online learning and teaching. From the study, the author developed a number of key principles to guide the design of higher education, e-learning environments. The principles reflect the view that good teaching is good teaching (Ragan, 1998) because Author 2 believes that there are enduring premises about good teaching which transcend learning and teaching approaches and contexts. The intention was not to focus on the content of any particular course or program but on a set of guiding principles that could be applied to online environments across educational contexts.

Of relevance to this paper is the principle of the CHE factor with the concepts of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy. The significance of these three qualities to learning and teaching is not exclusive to the e-learning environment but they are critical in establishing and maintaining the “presence” factor in online settings. Familiar, conversational discourse and visual imagery which promote a sense of sharing and belonging can be used (e.g., “meet you in the coffee shop”; “talk to you tomorrow”; “see you in the forums”) and peer learning partnerships where experienced and inexperienced learners support each other can be established. In Author 2’s research, she found the use of personal email to support, guide, reassure and generally remind learners of the importance of their presence was well received as well as the use of photos and audio welcomes.

As part of the learning process, online educators can assist learners to question assumptions underlying their structures of understanding or to realise alternatives to their ways of thinking and living. This must be done with care and sensitivity. Brookfield (1994, p. 179) notes, “It is no good encouraging people to recognize and analyze their assumptions if their self-esteem is destroyed in the process”. King (2003, pp. 89-90) refers to this stage in the learning process as “building safety and trust” which can be communicated in “word, attitude and environment” and stresses the importance of valuing individual differences, affirming the

individual and recognising multiple perspectives and realities. The creation and maintenance of the human touch throughout the online learning experience encourages learners to feel they are members of a safe, supportive, productive learning community.

Twigg (2001) notes that human contact is necessary for more than just learning and that “encouragement, praise, and assurance that [learners] are on the right learning path are also critical feedback components” (p. 15). Learner feedback gathered during the initial study, and also since then highlights the importance of these human qualities being present in an online environment. Learners have described the online experience by using words and phrases such as “sense of connectedness and sharing”, enabling the “construction of new understandings and relationships”, “exhilaration”, “euphoria”, “inspiration”, and “passion” and the “opportunity for personal reassessment to explore beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, and abilities. A learner from a post-study activity observed that “... group interaction is based in concepts such as mutual respect, safety, and willingness to share a bit of self . . . caring, respectful human relationships are a necessary ingredient”.

It was evident in Author 2’s research that two key factors form the focus of learning in online environments: the people – the human element, and the activities – the actions. This moves the emphasis of learning away from what we learn, to who we learn from, with, and how we learn. The CHE factor is of relevance to online learners, facilitators, and designers. Empathy and understanding (facilitator-learner, learner-learner, and learner-facilitator) are critical emotions that are highly valued by participants in an online learning environment. This position (and the supporting evidence) challenges the perception that human-computer interaction online is an impersonal, individual activity. Given the appropriate online environment, learners and teachers can experience highly affective interpersonal interactions and the boundaries between formal and informal learning often disappear. A student from Author 2’s research observed that, “What technology affords us is the opportunity to reach out without the need for touch or eye contact. Perhaps we are challenging the notion that you can see a person's soul in their eyes, and that in fact, the soul transcends the physical to such an extent that you can feel and touch it even through a chat on the computer”.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

After several pedagogical discussions and sharing of research outcomes, pedagogical approaches and implications for practice, the two authors identified a distinct synergy between their teaching approaches and individual research. This process gave them the opportunity to outline their epistemological positions to teaching, learning and supporting tertiary education students. The authors also shared a range of student feedback, evaluation data from their courses as well as academic writing they had done previously to articulate their learning and teaching approaches. From these multiple data sources the two researchers were able to investigate and appreciate the uniqueness of their own and each others’ approaches and generate a rich description and deeper level insights of their own and each other’s work (Stark & Torrance, 2005; Yin, 2003).

Using an approach similar to that of thematic analysis, they recognised that they shared similar epistemological approaches in their work with their respective undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts of learners. The next stage of the process involved categorical analysis where the authors identified six key principles or themes that emerged as being common to both their approaches whilst also highlighting those practices unique to each educator (Patton,

2002). This process involved reflexivity and prolonged engagement with each other and the data where authors participated in critical, co-constructive conversations to share and discuss terms and common phrases of the categories arrived at for coding (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In this way the researcher's own perspectives were appreciated, whilst being informed by each other's points of view. The six learning and teaching principles that had relevance to both learning contexts were identified as:

1. Ensure students feel connected, supported and valued as individuals and as part of a community of learners.
2. Ensure teaching and learning activities have contextual application and relevance so that they are productive, meaningful and engaging.
3. Outline clear expectations, approaches and levels of support to motivate and enhance the student learning journey.
4. Clearly communicate the pedagogical beliefs and approaches of the teacher.
5. Provide resources to suit a range of learning styles and to ensure maximum flexibility.
6. Encourage and motivate students to embrace course content, concepts and the perspectives of others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This process of sharing, comparing and co-constructing not only was important for the authors in developing a heightened awareness and appreciation of pedagogical approaches but the pedagogical conversations which took place led to a deeper understanding, reinforcement and revisiting of what is valuable to consider for improving the learning journey of the tertiary student in an ever-changing world.

Conditions have been proposed for implementing the focus on the human element in learning and teaching - promoting a sense of safety and openness in the learning environment, and the necessity for all participants to be trusting, empathetic, caring, authentic, sincere, and demonstrating a high degree of integrity. Learning activities that support a learner-centred approach that promote student autonomy, participation, and collaboration are important. Activities that encourage the exploration of alternative personal perspectives, problem-posing, critical reflection, and personal self-disclosure ensure that discussing and working through emotions and feelings occurs before critical reflection. The learning situation should be democratic, open, rational, and have access to all available information (Taylor, 1998).

Although this paper has attempted to articulate a generic set of principles to connect learners with course materials and with each other, just how generalisable these principles are is not evident. Researchers/practitioners are invited to explore how these principles might be applied to other contexts such as other discipline/content areas, other educational sectors e.g., compulsory education (school) contexts and with culturally diverse groups of learners. Additionally, the authors encourage educators to engage with their colleagues in pedagogical conversations that explore ways they support students on their learning journey whilst ensuring this extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is anticipated that the principles articulated in this paper may provide an impetus for pedagogical conversations between other tertiary educators.

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