

Guest Editorial

Introduction to special theme issue: Online Pedagogy in Practice

This special theme issue of the *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning* provides an opportunity for several University of Southern Queensland (USQ) students to share their understandings of the practice of online pedagogy.

The course 'Online Pedagogy in Practice' is offered in the USQ Faculty of Education Masters program. I drew on my doctoral research into transformative learning and my experience as an online educator to design and facilitate the course. My interest in transformative learning emerged from a serendipitous incident which occurred in the early stages of my doctoral study in 2000. On a whim, I attended a Transformative Learning conference in the USA and found myself surrounded by positive, supportive, enthused educators - for me a transformative experience as my educational perspectives were both challenged and affirmed. This set me on a path to find out more about transformative learning and how the principles could be applied to my practice as an online educator. Despite the lack of extant research at that time linking the concept of transformation to learning online, I felt that online settings could provide a 'friendly' environment that would support learning contexts promoted by adult education theorists such as Knowles (1990), Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (2003) - collaborative, interactive learning communities that support and promote transformative learning.

While the course is focused on pedagogical approaches to online learning, the main aim is to connect the learners so that together they may explore, investigate, formulate and challenge their own ideas - and the ideas of others - about online pedagogy. The course design draws on existing theory and knowledge relating to the following themes evident in the literature:

- theories of learning, particularly transformation theory (transformative learning),
- learning and teaching in online settings (online pedagogy); and
- principles of adult learning.

The design reflects the concept of learning as a lifelong journey where adults have a wealth of experience on which to draw and aims to provide authentic activity that is task-centred, practical and with immediate application to the learner's work. The course design is shaped by transformative learning principles and the concept of a dilemma leading to disorientation and then to learning. According to Mezirow (1991), all meaning is based on the learner interpreting experience with the critical dimension of an adult's learning being reflection, or the process of validating ideas and assumptions based on prior learning. He believes the role of the educator is to help learners focus on, and examine, the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings and actions, assess the consequences of these assumptions, identify and explore alternative sets of assumptions, and test the validity of assumptions through effective participation in reflective dialogue.

This concept of a dilemma leading to learning is reflected in the course design where learners are presented with a number of educational dilemmas or triggers - for example, 'how to create and sustain a sense of presence in an online learning environment' - and are provided with a process to engage rigorously with the dilemma content, with each other and the facilitator to explore appropriate theory and related practice. The course assessment requires the learners to practically demonstrate how principles and practices can be applied to enhance online

learning and teaching by conducting a pedagogical event in the virtual environment using their peers as learners. In addition, guided by a number of stimulus questions, learners keep a reflective diary of their learning journey accompanied by their analyses of changes in their perspectives and the resultant pedagogical shifts in their approaches to learning and teaching. The course design aims to dispel the myth of the theory-practice divide. Rather than theory and practice being separate and even mutually exclusive, the intent is to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the two. That is, effective educational research must be situated in real world contexts and effective practice must be explicitly framed and informed by research.

Course assessment consists of a five-stage process that aligns with Mezirow's (1991) phased approach to addressing disorienting dilemmas. Learners select a dilemma (pedagogical topic), focus on their own context, but work as a community of learners. Because the success of the course relies very much on learning as a community process and on understanding roles and responsibilities within a group, learners are guided through a group formation process early in the course. Table 1 illustrates how the stages of assessment relate to the phases of addressing a dilemma. The topic 'providing authentic assessment and meaningful feedback in online environments' has been used as an example. The papers presented in this *IJPL* theme issue have been drawn from Stage 4 of the assessment process.

Table 1: Assessment stages and dilemma phases

Assessment stages	Dilemma phases (Mezirow, 1991)	Questions, activities	Marks
1 Guided preparation of a literature review	1 Experience disorienting dilemma and undergo self-examination 2 Presentation of a dilemma	1 What issue concerns you? What do you want to find out more about? 2 What does the literature say about authentic assessment and the provision of meaningful feedback? 3 Define authentic assessment, meaningful feedback	20
2 Participation in and contribution to discussion activities	2 Critical assessment of the dilemma 3 Exploration and consideration of options and courses of action	1 How can I ensure that assessment in my online environments is authentic? 2 How can I ensure feedback is meaningful, timely and effective?	10
3 Facilitate and conduct a pedagogical (teaching) event online	4 Planning a course of action 5 Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing	1 Select means of creating authentic assessment and meaningful feedback 2 Facilitate a teaching event online that demonstrates authentic	20

Assessment stages	Dilemma phases (Mezirow, 1991)	Questions, activities	Marks
	<p>one's plans</p> <p>6 Provisionally trying out new roles</p> <p>7 Building of competence and self-confidence in a safe environment</p>	<p>assessment/meaningful feedback</p> <p>3 Ensure the activity is relevant to you and your professional practice. Ensure there is a sense of substantive, meaningful purpose for the existence of this activity.</p> <p>4 Each group member to participate in a seminar discussion around this topic</p>	
4 Prepare and present a paper at the Virtual Seminar	8 A reintegration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective	<p>1 Prepare a joint or individual paper according to the author guidelines provided (suitable for publication)</p> <p>2 Present the paper at the Virtual Seminar and invite interaction with peers</p>	30
5 Reflective diary		Maintained throughout the course	20

The first article by Niru Bhati, Sarah Mercer, Kenneth Rankin and Brendon Thomas explores the barriers and facilitators to the adoption of tools for online pedagogy. The authors identify common barriers such as time, cost, pedagogical use, technical issues and lack of strategic management initiatives and describe new issues which have emerged in this field. They then explicate some of the pragmatic pathways educators have taken in their attempts to overcome these issues and provide some useful advice for institutions in addressing these issues.

In the second article, Janet Bradley explores the practice of promoting and supporting authentic online conversations and asks the question, 'Which comes first - the tools or instructional design?' She emphasises the need for instructional design elements to be embedded in a learning environment to promote academic discourse and argues that the presence of communication tools alone in an online environment does not assure collaboration and the construction of new knowledge. Referring to a pedagogical event she conducted as part of the requirements of her Masters study, she describes a number of instructional design strategies which played a key role in promoting and supporting online conversation.

Articles three and four are presented as two parts of one story relating to the process of creating and sustaining online learning communities that promote transformative learning. The authors purport that an environment of mutual trust enables a community to share and explore individual, beliefs, values and assumptions and to resolve differences by respecting minority views and applying objective reasoning. This requires some degree of intellectual conflict. With a supportive community, conflict can be nurtured into constructive

controversy. This is intellectual conflict where individuals seek new knowledge and accommodate others' perspectives. Part I by Sall'ee Ryman, Lisa Burrell, Greg Hardham, Bruce Richardson and Jane Ross introduces the concept of preparing the learning community for constructive controversy while Part II by Sall'ee Ryman, Lisa Burrell and Bruce Richardson focuses on sustaining a learning community through constructive controversy.

Taken together, the four articles offer an interesting exploration of the joys and challenges of using online pedagogy as a means of providing rich diversity in learning experiences. The papers attempt to demonstrate the connectedness between the principles of sound learning design and the ability of the learning experiences to reflect effective practice in real life.

The issue concludes with one article that is not related to the overall theme of online pedagogy. This article by Lewis Asimeng-Boahene pertains to the use of African proverbs as vehicles for enhancing critical thinking skills in Social Studies education. The context of this study relates to African American minority students in particular, and students in general in the United States.

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