

Pedagogical Innovation: facilitating knowledge development in a multi-layered, blended-learning environment

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Abstract: This paper documents how a course originally designed to be delivered via traditional face-to-face methods and an additional distance-learning stream was redesigned to integrate both streams in a blended learning ‘classroom without walls’ virtual spaces environment. Discussed here are the formative feedback teaching elements and assessment methods utilised in the reshaped course, along with particular learning issues for transnational students. Addressed also for this new course model are the methods for moderating teaching and assessment practices to ensure fairness, equity, and compliance to university regulations. Tertiary learning and teaching is evolving through the use of innovative pedagogical practices utilizing social media, communication and information sharing technologies and virtual learning spaces. The use of online and blended learning approaches means that any student can be regarded as transnational in the sense they can learn in the culture and space of their choosing, at customized times to suit their lifestyle or availability. To support this choice, new courses must be constructed around learning flexibility in technology based virtual spaces; that is, classrooms without walls. In such settings, student-centred learning can be facilitated through the use of technologies for engaging students in activities that have relevance to them, and encourage retention. Whatever the form of delivery, learning must involve reliable and equitable assessments to ensure that all students in virtual or classroom settings receive equal levels of formative feedback contextualised to the culture of learning found in their various international settings. This paper proposes that to cater for a mix of student learning styles, physical settings, and online technologies, a new multi-layered approach to learning, called here ‘blended-blended’ learning can create success.

Keywords – online learning, transnational, virtual spaces

Introduction

Ensuring that new course designs align with widely accepted learning theories and application of learning theories through education models is difficult in the context of changing education institution structures and operating environments. With the rapid emergence of today's technologies and communication devices that students access daily, there is little correlation between the student behaviours with current technologies in their work or social environments and what they experience within a study program: key points noted in the video by Dr. Michael Wesch, "A Vision of Students Today" (Wesch, 2013). Compounding the situation is the fact that widely recognized learning theories including Behaviourist, Cognitivist and Social Constructivist, were defined before technology as we know it was invented, as demonstrated in the infographic published by Edudemic (Lepi, 2012). As academia strives to integrate technology into their programs the temptation is to retrofit these new technologies into existing courses, often with a potentially flawed and dangerous assumption that the existing model is an effective example of these learning theories to begin with (LearningTheories, 2013).

This paper provides an overview of how one educator negotiated the pathway through what began as a "delivery-based" approach to learning to a more "community building" approach focused on knowledge, discovery and application.

Towards a new pedagogic design

Much current educational practice is based on the seminal experiential learning theories, including the androgogy principles for adult learning proposed by Knowles (Knowles, 1984) and the 4-stage cycle of the established Kolb (Kolb & Lewis, 1986; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002) model, which have proven to be successful in fostering asynchronous and synchronous student-centred environments. Pedagogic principles frequently applied by the authors in their teaching roles include 'communicating through social media', 'using information sharing technologies' and 'working in virtual learning spaces', similar to the points discussed by Sir Ken Robinson in his video "The Art of Teaching" (Robinson, 2013) in the Microsoft Partner in Learning video series. Creating a new pedagogic model that is sympathetic to the potential of technology and a learning theory reflective of current student behaviours with these technologies will require a new course design; a challenge that can ultimately be successful and is frequently discussed in the research of Bates (Bates, 2013). Emergent from the redesign of the course discussed here was the view that "learning is a social, active, and (a) participatory process" (Siemens, 2013). What became obvious through student participation in the redesigned course were many behavioural traits as discussed in the video "Networked Student" by Wendy Drexler (Drexler, 2013).

The existing course syllabus utilized a typical academic semester of 16 weeks with an emphasis on creating a classroom and incorporating two assessment points based on individual work with limited feedback through returned mid-term and final essays. This was a "one-size fits all" approach. The new course design also utilized 16 weeks with an emphasis on creating a community, utilizing connectivity and bridges for communication. The new syllabus is based on multiple assessment points (up to 7) from a mix of team assignments and individual work with frequent feedback and submission of project work and no scheduled mid-term or final exams. This approach seeks to provide customized learning for individuals. Table 1 compares and contrasts different elements in the redesign process.
[Insert "Table 1 – Pedagogic comparisons for the course redesign"]

Theory, technology and transformative learning

The learning theory used as a framework for the new course design described in this case study is “Connectivism: A learning theory for the Digital Age”, proposed by Siemens (2005). In an ePortfolio article published August 2012, Kevin Stranack methodically discusses and critiques Siemens theory, noting key points not mentioned in the Siemens article but experienced by the authors including structuring synchronous online events and facilitating Connectivist networks (Stranack, 2012). In contrast to theories mentioned above, Connectivism theory is reliant on technology and as proposed by Siemens (Siemens, 2005), views learning as a network process that creates knowledge. As stated by Downes on page 85 of his epublication “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge” (Downes, 2012):

“At its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections. Hence, in connectivism, there is no real concept of transferring knowledge, making knowledge, or building knowledge. Rather, the activities we undertake when we conduct practices in order to learn are more like growing or developing ourselves and our society in certain (connected) ways. This implies a pedagogy that (a) seeks to describe 'successful' networks (as identified by their properties, which I have characterized as diversity, autonomy, openness, and connectivity) and (b) seeks to describe the practices that lead to such networks, both in the individual and in society (which I have characterized as modeling and demonstration (on the part of a teacher) and practice and reflection (on the part of a learner))”

When establishing the transformative learning experience, technology was emphasized and framed in the practical value a student gains through the principles of work-integrated-learning when selecting their course-related projects. The technologies currently used in the professional world, as discussed by McKinsey (McKinsey, 2013) and Parry (Parry, 2013) echoed the results from a pre-course survey identifying student levels of familiarity with different technologies. Originally, three well-known social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube and Google) were integrated into the course for ease of management. Students quickly introduced new technologies as noted in Table 1, including digital storytelling and using various software applications to create a video, social curating and book-marking applications to organize URLs and links for content, and creating virtual spaces such as ‘Wikis’ for online collaboration with team members.

To foster engagement in the transformative learning process, all students were encouraged to bring their digital devices, including mobile phones, to course sessions with an emphasis on using the devices in real time to create the learning experience (Stone, 2013). Incorporating these devices created convenience but raised issues concerning privacy online, intellectual property rights, copyright and Creative Commons licensing, which were addressed through policy and procedures in place with various Web 2.0 sites and university practices. All students were required to create a recognizable digital presence and profile within the course cohort individually and as a team with no regard to enrolment status, either online or face-to-face.

This requirement to maintain an online presence led the authors to coin the term ‘blended-blended’ to describe the emerging multi-layered education model. The combination of integrating technologies and a wide array of digital devices highlighted observed behaviour

amongst the students described as ‘partial attention’ (Stone, 2013) and ‘semi-sync’, discussed by Linda Stone in her blog article (2008). A related term identifying this behaviour is offered in the video Learning to Change, Changing to Learn (Pearson, 2008) when describing student actions in the zone between asynchronous and synchronous learning as ‘nearly now’. This behaviour is different to multi-tasking and is focused on attending to numerous small technology related tasks simultaneously such as updating account status, posting a request for information, or organizing digital content (for example, deleting texts) to help manage a potential overload of information or interactions.

To sustain the transformative learning environment, students were encouraged to self-organize and communicate using their devices by creating digital artefacts (videos, video conferencing sessions and content created in wiki-spaces) with little guidance, planning or control from the author. The artefacts were uploaded to a common virtual learning space, where everyone could view all work submitted and make comments. This approach allowed for spontaneous direct and indirect communication, collaboration and cooperation between students and across team boundaries, where it was easy to note new work or technologies triggered by previously submitted artefacts. Using the term coined in the 1950’s by Pierre-Paul Grasse, this ‘stigmergic’ (Elliott, 2006) approach to class management allowed students to actively democratize how they managed their academic experience, organized content and filtered information while creating their learning networks.

In conjunction with a stigmergic approach to class management, ‘paragogy’, the theory of peer-to-peer (Wheeler, 2012) learning (Corneli & Dandoff, 2011) allowed students to ‘interact with other students to attain education goals’. This approach also allowed teams autonomy in deciding how they manage contributions within their group by acknowledging constraints frequently noted in the transnational environment including unreliable broadband access, inadequate digital skills, employment commitments conflicting with academic commitments, individual contributions to the team, and expertise with a subject or topic. One direct application of paragogic (Corneli & Danoff, 2011; Corneli & Mikroyannidis, 2011) thinking required teams to rank their members on contributions and participation levels to identify and reconcile behaviour not always obvious to the faculty or tutor.

Peaks and pitfalls in the transformation journey

Numerous peaks of achievement occurred during the management of the course over the semester. A confidential reflective writing element was included in the final assessment to provide the students with a vehicle for candid comments as they reflected on their learning transformation in this course design (Siemens, 2013). The overwhelming theme of responses were positive documenting the students mental and emotional shift from participating in a “perfunctory distance-learning model” that didn’t provide intellectual challenge or utilize the students’ skills and expertise (but checked the completed box on their academic plan) to comments by many students expressing their resentment towards the course structure and the time the coursework demanded because it *did* require them to learn new skills – the ultimate paradox in an academic program!

In this multi-layered learning environment students continually learned from each other, leading to another strong theme expressing the positive value gained from the variety of viewpoints and commentary on a topic that a transnational student group creates, something they would not have gained from a traditional course design. The general comment about the redesigned course included the opinion that the assessments were “fair, equal and compliant”

with university processes. For all students, it was their first experience at peer evaluations and self-assessment processes.

Pitfalls in the management of the course included the conflict of institutional policies defining how tutors are budgeted for a traditional course (to grade two assessments per course with 20 minutes for each student allocated for a 3500 word essay) and the new work required in this blended-blended program (providing customer service as an informal technology help desk and frequent feedback on multiple assessment cycles). The technology infrastructure being accessed and relied upon was challenged including finding reliable bandwidth off campus and in remote circumstances, as well as accessing the IT Help Desk at the university, usually out of business hours, when students were learning a new technology. The faculties delivering the course were also challenged by having to learn new techniques for communicating and delivering content in the online environment. Examples of these new faculty level skills included learning how to create and manage podcasts, using online templates for assessments and providing feedback, and scheduling activities for online delivery with technology such as a video conferencing session that is recorded and available for replay and includes interactive questions and engagement activities.

The “elephants in the room” in the course redesign are (a) the utilization of the university mandated Learning Management System (LMS) that all students were required to access but reluctant to use and (b) the role of a textbook in this course. The authors did not utilize the LMS for teaching purposes due to the login process becoming a barrier to access. For this course redesign, the LMS was utilized as a filing cabinet for course content and all identified Web 2.0 applications were accessed independently of the LMS so that the students could retain ownership and mobility of their work through their own documentation housed in an account with a public ePortfolio site. This is a controversial topic at many institutions because students are aware of their loss of control over their work in the digital environment. They usually do not challenge the notion that the university ‘owns’ their essays since such items are what they do to get through the course. The authors observed greater sense of ownership and commitment by students when making their digital artefacts, a behaviour that brought emphasis in the context of work-integrated learning and utilizing the artefacts beyond the academic environment. This course did not identify a required textbook for studies, which was a point noted in the majority of student feedback as positive and well compensated for through peer-to-peer learning (“better than a textbook”) and content available online.

Conclusion

When designing a course prioritizing online engagement and eliminating associations with online distance learning models, students gain autonomy through building relationships that generate customized pedagogies from the relationships. The biggest achievement in this course redesign was validating the authors’ hypothesis that students can generate and create the content of a course and that valid learning does take place. Morris and Strommel (Morris & Strommel, 2013) highlight a supporting discussion in their blog post “Pedagogies of Scale” (June 2013). In a blog post “Rhizomatic Learning: Community as Curriculum” (Cormier, 2008) Cormier presents a similar opinion:

“...curriculum is not driven by predefined inputs from experts; it is constructed and negotiated in real time by the contributions of those engaged in the learning process. This community acts as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning...”

For an outside observer of this ‘blended-blended’ course design there is no distinction between an online and a face-to-face student as everyone communicated, contributed and participated online. For the participants, the walls of the classroom were literally removed and their networks and knowledge expanded exponentially through a course design that prioritized an engaging and online course, incorporating work-integrated learning principles, and including face-to-face sessions as added-on elements. The biggest risk in this new course design is the potential reality that students can (and will) outperform faculty with technology skills and customized learning, leading to a secondary risk of faculty lacking online credibility. The pedagogic innovation that underpins the ‘blended-blended’ course design creates a learning environment where all students can be regarded as transnational, with engagement fostered to create retention and develop workplace related and life-long learning skills.

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Table 1 – Pedagogic comparisons for the course redesign

PEDAGOGIC COMPARISONS

Current teaching practices + emerging online engagement models

Traditional course Dual streams Face-2-face + Online Distance (independent non-interactive streams) Class size 40+ Behaviourist + Cognitivist + Social Constructivist theories Designed as F2F with Online as ‘added-on’ Teacher-centric Technology added as retrofit	Online (engagement) course Single stream Online hybrid (integration of F2F+Online students) Class size 40+ and scalable Experiential + Andragogy + Paragogy (Peer learning) + Reflective practices + Connectivist theories Designed as Online with F2F as ‘added-on’ Student-centric Technology established as primary format
LEADING THE COURSE	
Lecturer + Tutor – Lecturer managing course content and Tutor reteaching same content in tutorial session	Two facilitators – one managing course content and the other managing technology and online engagement
ACCESSING COURSE CONTENT	
F2F – CLASSROOM Weekly lecture + Textbook + LMS	ONLINE - VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT Podcasts – specific content Recorded sessions - various recorded formats (LMS-BbCollaborate + video conferencing Google Hangouts + Skype + student contributions) Textbook (not compulsory)
ONLINE DISTANCE LMS + Flatfile of content + Textbook (obligatory)	
CONTENT DELIVERY	
ONE WAY TRANSMISSION Single authority -> Lecturer	MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS OF TRANSMISSION Multiple authorities -> Students + Facilitators VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

F2F CLASSROOM Lecture -Powerpoint (offline) -Lectopia recording (audio) -BbCollaborate recording (audio, text and webcam) Textbook (physical) Core readings (digital)	Podcasts - (content specific, short in time describing concepts, formulae and theories etc.) Textbook (physical) Core readings (digital) Web content - provided by peers Peer interactions in VLE - comments/dialogue on course exercises “Flipped” sessions – content driven by students “flipped classroom model” recorded and available online- can be in physical space (Classroom) or online space (LMS-BbCollaborate)
ONLINE DISTANCE LMS content Textbook (physical) Core readings (digital)	
ASSESSMENTS	
F2F CLASSROOM Faculty graded Products for assessment -exam + essays + presentations Frequency -mid-term + final <u>- bottleneck model</u>	Peer evaluations Self-evaluations Faculty evaluations Faculty grading (no peer input) Products for assessments -Digital artefacts (submitted to VLE) - Peer and Faculty -Other submissions (E.g. ePortfolio of digital content including recorded presentations) – Faculty grading Digital presentations – Peer and Faculty Frequency -Ongoing (smaller scale evaluations more frequent with quick turnaround time) <u>- dispersed node model</u>
ONLINE DISTANCE Faculty graded Products for assessment -exam + essays Frequency -mid-term + final <u>- bottleneck model</u>	
COURSE INTERACTIONS	
F2F CLASSROOM + ONLINE DISTANCE One person reading submitted work – Lecturer/Tutor “No co-learning”	VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT All course participants read/evaluate all peer work “All co-learning”
ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN F2F and ONLINE STREAMS	
F2F CLASSROOM + ONLINE DISTANCE - NONE No contact between F2F students and online distance students	F2F and ONLINE STUDENTS TOTAL INTEGRATION Hybridization of online and learning experience through online video introductions, use of collaboration technology (Google Drive) and no differentiation between streams for accessing content (there is no advantage being a F2F student). Online students are given a ‘face’ through video and F2F students are given an online presence.

ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND COURSE LEADERS	
F2F + ONLINE DISTANCE Lecturer/Tutor Little or no contact with Lecturer/Tutor outside of class	VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE) Facilitators Ongoing, frequent dialogue beyond the learning space in person or via email, VLE commenting, video conferencing, texting, messaging and other technologies
ENGAGEMENT WITH FEEDBACK IN LEARNING EXPERIENCE	
F2F + ONLINE DISTANCE Feedback and grading given by Lecturer/Tutor - <u>bottleneck model</u>	VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT Feedback from Peers/Facilitators Students are encouraged to comment on peer projects (digital artefacts in public comment fields) and evaluate contributions using online forms. Faculty complete a similar process. Feedback is delivered through summarized reports of peer comments in a template document and in detailed podcasts by facilitators - <u>dispersed node model</u>
TECHNOLOGIES USED IN THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE	
F2F + ONLINE DISTANCE Email Activities on LMS (Assumes Lecturer is skilled in LMS Web 2.0)	VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT COMMUNICATION – personal emails + texting + messaging + twitter stream + others COLLABORATION – various online free applications (e.g. mind-mapping) + WIKI's on Google Drive and other spaces + other social media sites (e.g. Facebook and country specific versions) DISCUSSION FORUMS – individual blogs with rich media extensions STORYTELLING – numerous digital storytelling applications including movie making + animation + presentation applications (Prezi and Powerpoint) and others CONTENT MANAGEMENT – YouTube channel + Dropbox + RSSFeeds + alternative LMS platforms (Edmodo etc) + range of social book-marking sites (e.g. Diigo, Delicious, PearlTrees etc.) VIDEO CONFERENCING – LMS platforms (e.g. Blackboard Collaborate) + Google hangouts + Skype NETWORKING – through class relationships (extended significantly through student backgrounds uncovered during coursework) PORTABILITY OF STUDENTS WORK – Google sites + ePortfolios outside of LMS + other sites (Wordpress, Tumblr, Blogspot etc.)

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