Economics, Politics and Learning; negotiating distributed learning in the print based learning environment.

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Abstract

Institutional engagement in processes of Distributed Learning has grown as a result of an increased interest in decentralised education, the increased availability of technology and the promotion of life long learning. Traditionally, distributed learning has been seen as one way of increasing student numbers in a relatively cost effective manner. However, contemporary funding structures are designed to encourage universities to maintain enrolments and reduce rates of attrition. Though laudable, this emphasis may impact on the academic quality of unit offerings. This paper explores the end result of this process in a School for Indigenous Australian studies. It identifies a disjunctive political and economic discourse that exists as a sub-text to the design process and then describes a pragmatic solution for unit design which is framed within a cohesive Instructional Design paradigm.

Introduction

The economic base for university teaching is formed according the criteria established by the Higher Education Funding Act 1988. The criteria set by the Act and the formulae used by DETYA (cf. http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/unis.htm#Funding Framework) largely determine the strategic priorities and educational goals set by the institutions. The discourse around educational processes is dominated by priorities that emphasise recruiting and retaining students so as to ensure a stable funding base in order to retain the current staffing profile and develop strategies for future development.

The pressures of recruitment and retention have broadened the catchment base of the institutions and have introduced greater variability between students in terms of experience and capacity to carry out coursework. In parallel, a move to funding based on outcomes, as opposed to recruitment, puts pressure on the universities to ensure students successfully complete their courses. At the same time, the universities remain committed to the maintenance of appropriate educational standards.
This situation creates a paradoxical predicament in which a disjunction emerges between the institution’s capacity to improve retention rates whilst also maintaining higher academic standards. This environment encourages staff to adopt teacher centred approaches to learning at the expense of student centred learning styles, on the assumption that such an approach can ensure reliability of outcomes and better retention rates through control of the learning environment.

**Teacher Centred Learning**

Teacher Centred (TCL) learning styles offer distinct advantages to lecturers in situations where they desire tight control over the learning process and greater predictive capacity over assessment. Furthermore, TCL allows lecturers to control and systematise the structure, content and pace of unit delivery in a way that gives primacy to knowledge base of the lecturer.

We experienced three ways in which TCL can be legitimated in our school. First, by stressing the obligations implicit in the pastoral function of our school to provide places for students and ensure their success. Second, the instructional limitations of the print-based medium are perceived to be overcome by utilising the rigidity of a TCL approach. Third, the demographics and learning infrastructure limitations imposed by the least advantaged students in the group are used to establish the structured learning baseline for all students in the group.

Strong criticisms can be made of TCL and its legitimation. TCL is a deficit model of learning, which views the students as unable or unlikely to manage their own learning effectively. This model limits the resources (Moore and Brooks, 2001 p. 4) and learning potential of the group to the cognitive and intellectual capacities of the lecturer. Furthermore, TCL might also reduce opportunities for collaborative and interactive learning (Alessi and Trollip, 1991), whilst devaluing the learning capacity and responsibilities of the learner.

Criticisms may also be made of the manner in which TCL is legitimated in our specific context. First, the support functions of the School actually exist as an adjunct to achieving academic success in which the shared obligation is to ensure that students achieve accepted levels of academic achievement. Second, the perceived limitations of print based media, whilst potentially restrictive, do not necessitate a TCL approach. Rather than focus on the limitations of the delivery mode, a student centred approach encourages a creative approach to delivery in this medium. Third, students have a right to access the best unit materials. However, determining instructional models according to standards set by the least advantaged students in the group contradicts this right and questions the integrity of the unit.

TCL styles seem to offer lecturers the potential to control processes in unit delivery in such a way as to ensure positive outcomes in terms of student retention and success. However, TCL is a system without substantial theoretical support. In fact, the roots of this method lie in the Lancasterian monitory instruction approach. This hierarchical learning system gained prominence during a crisis of funding and competence in the USA during the 1800s. It was a system lacking “…theoretical unity and was totally separate from a recognisable theory of learning” (Saettler, 1968, pp. 27-30). However, it was a system that offered great economies of scale, albeit at the expense of existing educational theory, psychology and student enfranchisement. The legacy of this method can be seen in contemporary TCL practices in emphases on structured student groupings, acquiring knowledge and hierarchical notions of teacher control (Saettler, 1968, p 30).
Student Centred Learning

Student Centred Learning (SCL) provides alternatives to TCL which are relevant to the delivery of print-based units and may ensure the maintenance of academic standards in courseware. SCL is based on the notion that students learn best through discovery in a self-directed learning environment based on their real life experiences and situations. The need for innovation and flexibility in unit design and delivery is particularly relevant to the application of "problem based" (or 'case based') learning principles. SCL provides the best opportunity to provide these flexibilities. In doing so, it reflects emphases implicit in government educational policy and is particularly relevant to the needs of Indigenous Australians. Students in our school do experience acute differential access to higher education, and they do so within the context of complex issues affecting the performance of those students within the University system; Ham, 1996; .

Legitimate issues of equity are implicit in the application of SCL. A core issue in curriculum development for Indigenous higher education is the notion that "...all students irrespective of their cultural background, have a right to equitable treatment". Generally, rapid gains in literacy and communication skills relevant to the academic milieu correlate with retention and success rates. Yet retention rates in our school in some areas are poor. Arguably, a major factor may exist in the disjunctions that exist, and processes of alienation that occur, between culturally based patterns and conventions of discourse in communication within the higher education learning environment (literate/oral tradition conflicts).

The indigenous school operating within the university constitutes part of the strategic response to this perceived need. Sound argument exists to support the creation of curricula that recognise the discourse traditions in play and provide appropriate and flexible framing as well as providing models and protocols for action. In particular, these curricula must be designed to ensure that institutional structures do not reflect inequities that may be implicit within the system; ).

SCL provides the best and most rationale learning environment for Indigenous students despite the belief that TCL can ensure appropriate outcomes in particular economic contexts. SCL would seem to be the model that best accommodates the political demands for equitable access to education for Indigenous students whilst also recognising the theoretical dimensions of educational strategies for encouraging learning processes within the Indigenous educational context.

Furthermore, SCL is able to claim legitimate and significant historical antecedents that have informed the development of contemporary educational theory. These antecedents provide common and consistent themes in theory and practice that accentuate a learning psychology based on active and incremental gains in knowledge in collaborative, realistic, meaningful and individuated learning environments. The evolution of this theory of learning commenced about 2500 years ago with assumptions of civil mindedness as a logical consequence of learning (Saettler 1968 p. 14). It continued to develop as a consistent theory of learning emphasising factors such as problem solving, the centrality of enquiry and individual differences in learning. Further emphases on self activity, creativeness, social participation and motor expression as learning modes reveal the roots of contemporary ideas of instructional design as well as an understanding of the psychology of learning (Saettler, 1968 pp. 14-42).

The consistent core assumption that this historical process reveals is that the cultivated human mind seeks to know the objective reality of the world and that the primary role of education is to develop and strengthen the skills of enquiry and critical analysis that serve
this need (Saettler, 1968, p. 24). This contention also forms the ideological and philosophical basis of our pragmatic response to the design of this unit.

The Instructional Design Component.

Writing this unit involved collaboration between a lecturer with no instructional design background and an instructional designer. The use of instructional designers to assist academics in the production of a unit of study is relatively new. The role of the Instructional Designer in the process is to ensure that the design of the package is based on sound educational theory and practice which emphasises instruction from the perspective of the learner rather than from the perspective of the content and teacher. Influential factors for design include; learner readiness, instructional strategies, media to be used, required support, determination of student learning styles and probable revisions (Kemp and Morrison 1998, p. 3).

This unit was based on an established model of unit development, this practice being recommended as "... a means to acquiring the necessary conceptual and communication tools for visualising, directing and managing processes for generating episodes of guided learning; allow us to view both the linear and concurrent aspects of instructional development; and allow us to select or develop appropriate operational tools." (Gustafson and Branch, 1997).

Fig.1
The ‘ten stage’ model used in designing the unit

The model used in designing and writing this unit is a model for instructional design adapted from Foshay, et al (Rothwell and Kansas, 1998) (See Figure 1 above). This model identifies and represents ten stages of instructional design. This model provides an excellent framework for ensuring that the completed product identifies and addresses problems through the application of appropriate intervention strategies (Kemp and Morrison, 1998, p. 21). It also facilitates a student centred approach to instruction through focusing on the needs of the learner including but not limited to; general characteristics (such as age, gender, education and ethnicity), entry competencies, learning styles, academic information and personal and social characteristics (Kemp and Morrison, 1998, p. 37).

Developing unit content utilising this model ensures connectivity between all aspects of the course. Content and objectives relate directly to identified needs. Assessment reflects the needs of the students and links directly to the stated objectives. A learning sequence is developed to reflect the lives of the learners and instructional strategies are selected that meet the needs of the learner while adhering to sound educational theory. The stages of development are reflected in the design and implementation of the package, which concludes with an evaluation process to complete the cycle.

A Pragmatic Approach to Unit Development

A pragmatic approach was taken to writing this unit in which we recognised that institutional demands for predictable outcomes demanded accommodation. However, this pragmatism did not extend to promoting TCL as appropriate. As a resolution strategy, it was decided to develop a learning package offering both the teacher centred and student centred learning environments.

We set about developing a dual mode approach to the distributed learning unit, which provided highly structured support through directed learning and teacher centred processes for some students, whilst allowing other students to adopt a student centred, non-directed mode of study. The choice of delivery mode rests with the individual student. We did recognise that implied in this decision is a value judgement as to the relative superiority of self-directed SCL.

The result was a highly structured learning package with two aspects. First, there is the Directed Study option. This option has a set content; a set structure and a teacher centred approach to content delivery. Second is the Non-Directed Study option. This mode of delivery offers the student a set of objectives, which they must achieve. The student then selects content based on subjective interests, experience and knowledge prior to developing their own structure to achieve these objectives.

The integrity of the course is maintained by keeping the same course objectives and assignment requirements in both modes of delivery.

Directed Study (Teacher Centred Learning)

This study option consists of nine highly structured modules for study. Each module consists of set content, set activities, set timelines, set support materials and set assessments and schedules. With this provided, the student works through the package and produces the required assignments according to requirements. "Presentation" is the instructional strategy used in this option. Set content is presented to the students in a way that required no input from them.
Non-Directed Study (Student Centred Learning)

This study option places the negotiated control of unit content in the hands of the student. Students are invited to identify a research topic. This choice is directed by their interests, experience and knowledge. After consulting with their lecturer and confirming this choice, the students use their selected content to address the set objectives of each of the nine modules.

Choice in delivery modes

A core assumption, supported by theory, is that student choice is critical to developing SCL options for students. In offering students the choice of delivery modes, no stated lecturer preference for either mode is given. Students can achieve identical assessment outcomes regardless of the delivery mode chosen. Furthermore, a student can change their chosen delivery mode at any time during the course.

Evaluation of unit performance

Throughout the delivery of this unit in Semester Two 2001, a formative and summative review process will be carried out. This evaluative process will achieve three goals. First, it will determine student satisfaction with the learning experience. Second, it will provide data as to the choices students made to engage with the TCL process or the SCL processes, and determine the constraints around that choice. Finally, the evaluative research process will provide baseline data to indicate the relative success of the dual mode approach to instruction in retaining student numbers.

Conclusion

The dual mode model of unit delivery uses sound theoretical knowledge to build active learning capacity in students. Yet, this model also addresses some concerns about the costs associated with poor student retention rates. It is possible that most students might choose to do the Directed Study option. This choice can be seen as rational in circumstances where there is no intrinsic reward for choosing the more challenging Non-Directed study option. However, the way in which students make their choice, and for what reasons, is clearly of interest in developing an understanding of the dynamics of SCL in practice. As students progress, the capacity building potential offered by SCL ensures the development of critical awareness and research mindedness. Both factors are critical to academic performance, develop scholarly initiative and prepare individuals well for continuing success.

An ongoing evaluative assessment process will provide data, which may reveal relative differences in levels of student satisfaction with the learning experience. Also this data may reveal that high levels of student satisfaction can correlate with the maintenance of academic standards in either the TLC or SLC modes. However, there is no current evidence that supports the contention that the indigenous school can retain students more effectively using TCL approaches to learning. Inevitably, TCL approaches when utilised as a means of retention will inevitably erode academic standards, while disenfranchising students from proper engagement in the academic milieu. Ultimately, the argument for TCL processes, as a response to pressures of recruitment and retention, may be best confronted by examining comparative issues of power relations in the learning process.
References


