

Reinvigorating Educational Design for an Online World

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Abstract

With changes to higher education being significantly impacted by the rapid pace of technological evolution in the new millennium, there is a need to find greater humanity in the course development process. As traditional mediators and creative collaborators in the process of course design, educational designers are well positioned to bring spirit and soul to their work with academic staff. This paper explores the need for reinvigorating teaching and learning relationships through creative, post-egoist meaningful approaches to educational design in times of enormous technological and workplace change.

Keywords

Online learning, Educational design, Meaning and spirit

The Changing Educational Environment

Teaching and learning are about change and the effective university at the turn of the twenty-first century will be the university that can manage it.

(Ramsden, 1998: 347)

The Need for Change

Australian universities today are experiencing the effects of the globalisation of higher education, an explosion of knowledge, reduced public funding, increasing expectations on employment skills and pressures for greater accountability (Ramsden, 1998). This also seems to

be evidenced not only in Australia but in other parts of the world, as academic staff describe feeling alienated from their organisations (Lacy and Sheehan cited in Ramsden, 1998). The resulting disillusionment among staff creates an educational environment wrought with tension, risk and compromise, and the reasons given are:

- an absence of explicit organisational vision and direction
- inefficient administrative processes which thus reduce time available for research and teaching
- too much emphasis on managing resources and budgets, not enough interest in managing people
- insufficient rationale given for the imperatives to change
- too little emphasis on training and development to help people adapt to change (Lacy and Sheehan cited in Ramsden, 1998).

However despite this expressed lack of cohesion between the directions of management and staff, course design (and redesign) remains a constant in these times of change. In response to the globalisation of education, universities are attempting to tailor and market their courses to an increasingly diverse group of learners, who have a range of entry level knowledge and often are distributed across the globe. As with other regional universities, Southern Cross University has focused on sustaining a presence in the educational marketplace by building upon existing niche markets and through its networks of cross-national partnerships with industry and other educational providers. In the field of distance education this same disillusionment of staff is clearly echoed by recent research which shows that although there is a general recognition of the need for change, there are many barriers to successful implementation of these changes. An international sampling of over 2500 faculty and support staff reported that the five top barriers were:

- organisational resistance to change
- lack of shared vision for distance education in the organisation
- lack of strategic planning for distance education
- slow pace of implementation
- difficulty keeping up with technological changes (Berge and Muilenburg, 2000).

Maintaining Vision and Meaning Throughout Times of Change

Of note in both these above lists of dissatisfactions is the evident desire of academic staff for a holistic understanding of the organisational context for teaching, learning and scholarship. In addition to such a need for

strategic approaches to change, the second critical capacity of an effective university according to Ramsden (1998) is going to be the capacity to produce excellence. It would thus appear that handling the changes as manifest by mass higher education and knowledge growth is a challenge for managers of similar consequence as it is for teachers who aim to create among learners the culture of enquiry and the spirit of learning. Managing organisational change and the pursuit of excellence in such a globally determined context demands clear leadership and planning at top levels as well as strong support and encouragement from grass roots practitioners in higher education. Academic staff development and educational design services therefore must acknowledge the importance of the big picture in order to coherently support the inevitably changing practices of teaching staff. To take this even further, the most effective support for staff will be that which responds to the educator's search for meaning and honours the spirit and soul to be found in education (Kimber, 1999), and this certainly means a paradigm shift for most university staff development units or centres for teaching and learning.

Such a shift is envisioned by Gidley (2000) who sets out three possible and related scenarios for the roles of staff in universities of the future – 'the broker', 'the mentor', and 'the meaning maker'. While evidence can already be found for brokering in education, the roles of mentor and meaning-maker as described by Gidley would come into their own in a context of significant change. In these 'futureversities' mentors would support learners (both personally and online) as they complete a self-selected pathway of study. Mentors would thus need a broad and multifaceted understanding of teaching and learning, somewhat akin to the currently expressed desire for holism. Meaning makers or 'tomorrow's elders' (Gidley, 2000: 241), would have their role conferred upon them and this would entail a re-shaping of culture through the relationship between the meaning makers and communities of seekers within what might be termed 'humanversities'.

The Impact of Communication Technologies

The exploration and development of human consciousness could take over from information technology as an even faster arena of quickening. If so, it would be spiritual evolution, not technological evolution, that takes us into singularity.

(Russell, 1998: 10)

Speed of technological change

As the pace of global change accelerates exponentially, it tends towards the infinitely rapid (Russell, 1998). This point of infinite rapidity at the asymptote is referred to by mathematicians as the 'singularity', where equations break down and become meaningless. Russell's suggestion is that when life speeds up so much that we can only effectively live in the now, then a spiritual evolution will occur... but meanwhile, we find ourselves struggling to deal with the impacts of one of the major forces driving the pace of change in universities. Let's briefly examine the developments of communications technologies using the model of time proposed by Russell (1998).

In his book *Waking Up in Time*, Russell (1998) depicts the pace of change since the emergence of matter approximately 15 billion years ago, in terms of the 108 floors of the World Trade Centre in New York. Using this analogy, street level would represent the formation of our planet 4.6 billion years ago, and as we ride up the elevator following the emergence of simple organisms, crustaceans, fish, and dinosaurs, the first appearance of *Homo Sapiens* would be found on the top floor. In these terms the recent developments in computers, and biotechnology since the industrial revolution represent the top layer of paint on the roof of the building, 'almost too thin to measure' (Russell, 1998: 7). As already highlighted by the research of Berge and Muilenburg (2000), it's no wonder we are having difficulty learning so much so quickly, to keep pace with ever accelerating change, whilst also attempting to re-conceptualise the core purpose of universities!

Members of a global network

This new and rapidly changing environment of communication, particularly over the past 150 years has also meant that social, political, economic, educational and spiritual processes have undergone such significant change that our connections with each other in the 'global village' have been transformed. We are quickly leaving behind those who have no access to these forms of communication, yet global networking has already become a familiar concept in higher education. There has emerged the expectation that 'global networks introduce new opportunities and issues for learning on a global scale, which should be taken into account by [educational] designers' (Harasim, 1993a: 13).

In our efforts to take account of opportunities presented by teaching and learning in this new and promising online environment, our initial educational design approaches at Southern Cross University have included strategies for rewarding student participation online. Recognising that assessment supports and drives learning, we initially structured assessment tasks around online dialogue, information search and retrieval, and collaborative group projects. Our reflections on the effectiveness of these strategies have revealed some interesting issues (O'Reilly & Morgan, 1999; Morgan & O'Reilly, in press; O'Reilly, in press a; O'Reilly, in press b), such as the need to teach and assess new skills, and what impact online learning has upon flexibility, workloads and the consequent directions for staff development. According to Harasim (1993b) the online or global networks are considered as social spaces and increase our options in how we make contact with others, but defining these new options and understanding how they work in the educational context requires far more exploration.

Who is connecting?

Even though learning is acknowledged as fundamentally a search for meaning (Candy, 1991), in the online environment this search has increased in complexity. With new possibilities for anonymity and mutable reality online, one writer asks:

Who am I if I am not only capable of being in multiple times and places, but also in multiple identities; male female, other; old young or unborn; human, animal, plant, or inanimate object; or an atom, the universe, or a simulacrum of the godhead itself?

(Jacobson, 1993: 341)

Online, the notion that the relationship between teacher and student is both ephemeral and metaphorical is challenging and confronting. What happens to us and our physical bodies when we engage in a teaching-learning relationship online is proposed by McWilliam and Palmer (1996) as they ominously suggest:

The anatomical body remains the means by which we experience the world, but the way we currently deal with it is to relegate it to the margins of our activities i.e. we place it at the end of a number of communication technologies where we expect it to teach and learn in the same way as if it were still in the lecture room. But our teaching 'bodies' and learning 'bodies' are capable of transmutation as the distinctions between the corporeal body of student and teacher and the technology itself become blurred.

(McWilliam and Palmer, 1996: 168–169)

Will we indeed become disembodied in our teaching and learning processes, thanks to higher education moving online? Are our 'tech(no)bodies' already at the mercy of viruses which can run rampant over the Internet? In this flexible or online system of delivery, are our roles now negotiable as to who is the teacher and who is the student? In a recent seminar conducted with the School of Law and Justice at Southern Cross University (June, 2000), experienced academic staff happily admitted that they knew a lot less of the online environment than their young students. Their lack of expertise in how to foster an online community of learners, encourage mutual support and sustain discussion in online forums, indicated mysteries yet to be deciphered.

With such a cautious approach, it is common among the majority of academics to begin using the technology simply for information and resource delivery well before attempting to engage in some kind of pedagogical relationship with learners via the computer environment. Thus we often see the medium keeping the core practices of teaching and learning at the 'margins of our activities'. On the other hand, research conducted by Jacobsen (1998) on the profiles of excellent teachers who are also early adopters of technology, is encouraging in that it shows early adopters apply technology in their teaching because it helps to solve a problem. They are not deterred by difficulties or impediments presented by technology itself, and have a willingness to share knowledge and expertise as a way of supporting further adoption of technology by their colleagues.

Making human contact

For the brave innovators among us, in the online environment our educational activities require new behaviours, a consciousness of our personas and a respectful engagement within the global network as a social construct. Jacobson (1993) very compassionately suggests some ways of humanising our online experiences. He suggests a series of ethics and values which we could consciously bring to online interactivity:

Civility

This principle of civility as expressed by a list host, for example, would not only tolerate differences among diverse participants but would seek out and raise alternative perspectives for the benefit of the online community.

Conviviality

Conviviality as invitingly illustrated by Jacobson, conjures images of the 'groaning table, the medieval feast, where one stuffs oneself with every morsel of information and swills a heady brew of knowledge' (p. 330).

Reciprocity

According to Jacobson, reciprocity is both the most significant and the scarcest of elements in the online environment. Beyond the simple exchange functions of interaction i.e. 'you give me your ideas and I give you mine', reciprocity means mutual knowing and influencing. Without a deliberate design which encourages and supports a true relationship based on such reciprocal sharing, online communities cannot succeed.

Harmony

Harmony results from designs of online activities which aim for collaboration and the kind of mutual respect inherent in acting with civility. The censorship recently witnessed in Australian businesses where employees were sacked for use of their email in ways other than for 'strictly business', demonstrates a lack of harmony in the operational norms of the corporate online environments in question.

Edification

The need for personal growth, learning and discovering what is in the online world is as yet limited by the knowledge, skills and approaches required to be truly efficient and effective online. However, there is an enormous amount of exploration one can do even while developing some expertise in information management.

Artfulness

The artfulness of the Internet is really in its infancy. When sufficient experimentation has occurred in the design and the potentials for our (mediated) relationships with one another, then we can expect to find a more mature artfulness emerging online.

Spirituality

Jacobson reflects whether 'there may be something profoundly moving about online communications and being on the Net' (p. 337). Perhaps the ability to connect to many others is somehow 'akin to reintegrating with the whole of humanity, with an evolving, dynamic collective memory' (p. 337) as in Jung's principles of collective unconscious.

These principles of honourable behaviour and spiritual expression on the Internet bring home the necessity for conscious design in its uses for

education. Jacobson (1993) urges us to act immediately. While both the infrastructure and our attitudes remain malleable and open to change, we need to discuss how the quality of online experiences can be improved and utilised to address a pedagogical concern. If we are caught in a technological trance we will be trapped into looking for technological solutions to our teaching and learning issues, or in other words we will have a solution looking for a problem (Jacobsen, 1998). 'If, however we are fully aware as we use the technology, there is a much greater chance that its use will be appropriate' (Miller, 1994a: 13).

Reinvigorating Educational Design for Online Education

[Holistic learning] asks us to focus on what is ultimately important in life. It asks that we see our work as more than just preparing students to compete with one another. Although we must still teach skills to ready students for the workplace, we need a broader vision of education that fosters the development of whole human beings.

(Miller, 1998-9: 48)

Creativity, overload and survival

As we have seen, the broad ranging and world-wide changes in education alongside the rapidly evolving technologies for communication and information management, have set the scene for a most challenging of times. Demands upon staff to maintain currency in their discipline are greater than ever before and, as in the opening quote from Ramsden (1998), effectively handling change within the university environment equals survival.

But our search for meaning in this complex context, has momentarily been overwhelmed by the mushrooming workloads of staff and constrained by the diminishing availability of resources. The many innovators, early adopters and early majority, have found their momentum for continuing innovation stalled, and the holistic recognition of the learner and the teacher, is for the moment seen as an idealistic choice reserved for the more devoted members of staff. Far too much of the online presence currently being touted globally, is merely a digital version of traditional text-based study packages, devoid of appropriate teaching strategies, lacking in innovative opportunities for dialogue and unable to support learners' conscious search for knowledge or construction of meaning. Collaborative educational design which takes place in a context of creativity, meaning and a truly 'higher education' is needed to get beyond the current hegemony of angst.

Just as important is also the conscious re-evaluation of course design where duplication of effort has resulted from approaches to teaching for differing modes of study. The associated work practices and the escalating workloads are clearly unsustainable, however, designing for ethical education and maintaining our social and intellectual capital within the university environment seem disappointingly low on the list of priorities along with the bargaining and competition for resources presently underway.

Educational design and revolution

The relevance of ‘fostering the development of whole human beings’ is questioned by today’s cynics in response to the marketplace notion of education. Are we further commodifying education in the ways we design and package our courses? Or can we manage to restore learning to its place as part of one’s vocation rather than preparatory to one’s vocation? Consider the perspective on learning which would emerge from the concept of ‘mentor’ as envisioned by Gidley (2000) who projects the following scenario:

[In the year 2030] instead of being responsible for a disciplinary subject area or course, mentors are responsible for a cluster of students (100 to 200 depending on the size and budget of the institution) who may be doing the widest possible range of courses and course-combinations. They are responsible for mentoring these students through whatever course they construct for themselves.

Gidley (2000: 241)

Among the more service-oriented practitioners in academia are educational designers, but Gidley’s futuristic scenario, raises key questions of the roles and responsibilities of educational designers in such a changed educational environment. For educational design to invigorate computer-based communications or interactions which are embedded in the process of learning, we must quickly move away from the ‘push-button’ delivery model of online education into contemporary designs. These need to not only incorporate a clear focus on interpersonal, individual or contextual factors in the process of learning, but also take account of the collaborative approach to development of learning materials and learning experiences in response to a rapidly changing educational context. Mentors and meaning-makers of the future will further need to work in collaboration with educational designers and staff developers to support non-linear, non-generational learning-by-doing

pathways. Untapped potential, and revolutionary teaching and learning must be explored:

Universities are scrambling to get into the distance education business. They see the computer as vital to this enterprise but it is not obvious that they know why it is vital. Universities want to deliver courses via the web. They want to do this because they are frightened that someone will do it before them and gain more prestige or more student revenue. The people who are putting their courses on the web are not doing it because they are interested in the exploration of new teaching methods. They do not see the web as a revolutionary instrument. But that is just what it is.

(Schank, 1999: 2)

In educational design at Southern Cross University, we have consistently built our relationships with teaching staff upon collaboration which brings to life the principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996). We have to date been able to facilitate creative solutions to educational problems and have gone a long way towards what Inglis called 'deep design' (1989: 247). The task before us now is to lead the explorations of the 'web as a revolutionary instrument' in teaching and learning, to break the fixed conceptions of delivery of resources, uncertainty in mediated communication and linearity in learning.

Spirit in teaching and learning

The great irony of our current times is the dissonance between how teachers teach and how they are expected to learn (Ellis, O'Reilly & Debreceeny, 1998). If academic staff can better align their professional development needs with their goals as educators, then the support we can provide as educational designers begins to resemble an enduring and authentic relationship in the academic community. As Robert Theobald explained in his series of radio interviews (ABC RN, 1998), we could benefit from understanding the Japanese approach to working together. Theobald describes this approach as 'relationship business' rather than 'transactional business' (p.9, Transcript 4). When working together to complete a project such as course design and development, instead of focusing on our service fees and details of our enterprise transaction, a shared emphasis on relationship would provide greater purpose and meaning in our workplace contexts. The ability to focus on and contemplate the lessons of the journey rather than looking only to arrive at the final destination as planned, imbues us with a greater spirit of teaching and learning.

Furthermore such a 'relationship business' in course development, can provide a model for staff in their approaches to teaching. To view teaching

as supporting the learner as a whole person again not only reminds us of the spiritual notions of Miller (1994a) but is also echoed by Australian educational administrators such as Ramsden:

An effective university will encourage its academics to consider their teaching as a means by which they can make student learning possible... this demands accurate assessment of their performance as professionals who can “shape the experiences” of their students and take their part by seeing that experience through the learner’s eyes.

(Ramsden, 1998: 355).

If teaching staff bring compassion, empathy and open-mindedness to their course design, then teaching and learning can gain enormous rewards from the advances in technology as the online environment supports the expression of human values. These are the kinds of values which Jacobson (1993) expressed including civility, conviviality, reciprocity, harmony and spirituality. Where course design takes account of such ethical values, the relationships between academic, educational designer and learner also express the revaluing of learning itself. An explicit expression of these values also takes us closer to addressing the complaint that universities place too little emphasis on managing people.

Conclusion

In summary, to reinvigorate the spirit of learning within staff and students is a fundamental focus of educational design in today’s online world. As such it represents a profession in which practitioners must bring a holistic approach and a balancing of individual needs with the need for group and social cohesion (Kimber, 1999). To honour the search for meaning we must continue to design for life-long learning in this rapidly changing educational environment, complete with its amazing technologies. Our course designs, supported by online technologies must also continue to grapple with the tensions between openness, linearity and flexibility, overcoming distance and isolation, while relating in both the physical and metaphysical environments. We must continue to keep in mind the need for maximising equity of access, and supporting the development of both generic and disciplinary competencies while recognising and assessing new skills. Our challenges don’t stop there since the online environment also demands we address issues of authentication and reliability, workload and work practices. But ‘people can only learn what they are ready to understand’ (Theobald, Lecture 6, 1998).

If we approach our professional practices from a spiritual place in our hearts, we will be able to work with others from an attitude of openness as with a mystery or novelty, exploring the position of the other, rather than presupposing it (Lederer, 1999). Mutual reflection upon our practices with our peers and colleagues as well as quiet contemplation on our own, are important strategies which can be employed much more often to enhance clarity and serenity in our overloaded lives. Creative envisioning also allows different scenarios to be considered. Our staff development programs can become more sensitive to open-ended exploration of issues and practices, and we as educational designers and staff developers can find joy in witnessing others celebrating their own achievements.

We even manage to swallow our frustration when somebody comes to us and tells us their new idea which turns out to be something we suggested a few weeks or days ago! We grasp, with difficulty, the fact that one often has a choice of *getting change* or *getting credit* for it.

(Theobald, 1998: 13, Transcript 1, emphasis added)

In the process of responding to these times of enormous change, we work with our colleagues in the belief that the need for spiritual and meaningful relationships outweighs the need for anyone's personal advancement. This is beyond survival, it's invigorating.

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