Reflections on Faculty Responses to Being Required to Teach Online

Reflexiones sobre las respuestas del profesorado a la obligación de enseñar en línea

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Abstract

The reluctance of some University lecturers to embrace change in their pedagogy over time is well documented and reported. Academics tend to frame issues relating to learning, teaching and in terms of their own discipline – their own "tribe and territory" and their own experience as learners.. This strong disciplinary focus and past experience can inhibit acceptance of change. Academics work within the dominant discourse about teaching in their discipline and may be antipathetic to staff development, advice, theory and research that are not discipline based. In this paper ten archetypes of responses to this challenge are described together with three significant implications for training, assessment and leadership. The challenge of responding to the need for social distancing has been interpreted by some as "taking my face to face class online" as opposed to designing an engaged learning for an online learning community. Some do want to change and explore new ways of teaching and learning and the potential that technology can afford for engaged and authentic student learning. But most do not.

Key Word: Mastery, Community of Inquiry, Constructivism, Faculty Development, Systems Thinking, Instructional Design.

Resumen

La renuencia de algunos profesores universitarios a aceptar cambios en su pedagogía a lo largo del tiempo está bien documentada e informada. Los académicos tienden a enmarcar las cuestiones relacionadas con el aprendizaje, la enseñanza y en términos de su propia disciplina - su propia "tribu y territorio" así como su propia experiencia como estudiantes. Este fuerte enfoque disciplinario y la experiencia pasada pueden inhibir la aceptación del cambio. Los académicos trabajan dentro del discurso dominante sobre la enseñanza en su disciplina y pueden mostrarse antagónicos a la capacitación, el asesoramiento, la teoría y la investigación que no se basan en su disciplina. En el presente documento se describen diez arquetipos de respuestas a este desafío, junto con tres implicaciones significativas para la formación, la evaluación y el liderazgo. El reto de responder a la necesidad de distanciamiento social ha sido interpretado por algunos como "llevar mi clase presencial a la virtualidad" en contraposición a diseñar un aprendizaje comprometido para una comunidad de aprendizaje en línea. Algunos quieren cambiar y explorar nuevas formas de enseñanza y aprendizaje, así como el potencial que la tecnología puede ofrecer para un aprendizaje comprometido y auténtico de los estudiantes. Pero la mayoría no.

Palabras clave: Dominio, Comunidad de Investigación, Constructivismo, Desarrollo del profesorado, Pensamiento sistémico, Diseño Instruccional.

Since COVID-19 pandemic led to public health driven decisions to lock-down schools, college and university faculty have been required to teach online. Globally, 1.6 billion students at all levels of education have been "taught" online. Many schools, universities and colleges around the world are delaying the return to "normal" until 2021 when it expected either a vaccine is in place or herd immunity will have reached a level where infection rates

are low and health care systems are able to cope with the volume of new cases requiring intensive care.

During the period April to June 2020 a small team worked with faculty in a variety of institutions around the world to support the institutions desire to offer meaningful learning experience in an online environment. Some engaged in this work had some past experience, but many did not.

What follows is a description of the ten types of faculty responses to this work we encountered. We connect these observations to an understanding of some aspects of best practice in the design, development and deployment of online learning in higher education.

The Mastery To Constructivist Design Continuum

Using systems thinking (Senge, 1990) and past studies of what happens when technology is introduced into organizations and colleagues are required to respond (Mills and Murgatroyd 1990; Rogers, 1962) a number of different responses were observed. To understand these, we need to understand something about the available options for online teaching. Table 1 below suggests two ends of a continuum: content mastery and constructivism.

Table 1: Continuum of Learning Designs

Content Mastery	Constructivism
• Content rich, sequential and linear • Strict adherence to curriculum and syllabus • Strong reliance on texts and "standard" materials • Learning is focused on remembering and applying knowledge and understanding • Assessment is about mastery • Students work primarily alone • Faculty are "experts" with knowledge	• Challenges begin the learning – starting with big constructs and then discovering the component parts. • Students and teachers are partners in a learning journey. • Learning is highly interactive, engaging and discovery-based. • Knowledge is explored, discovered, tested. • Students work in groups. • Assessment is authentic. • Faculty are coaches, guides, mentors, informers, connectors.

At the most traditional end of this continuum, a faculty member lectures using a synchronous platform, sets readings and activities, quizzes and tests as well as a mid-term and end of term examination, rather as many still do in more traditional face to face environments. They defend this work in terms of both tradition ("we've taught like this since Oxford began in 1249"), their experience ("this is how I was taught") and the pressure of time. It is also the path of "least change". It is a way of using synchronous platforms like Zoom, Google Hangouts, Adobe Connect "to do what we have always done".

At the other end of the continuum, a faculty member sets challenges and projects to small groups of students and provides coaching, guidance and mentoring as well as resources (Schmidt et.al, 2019). Students engaged in prototyping solutions to wicked problems, connect to content and scholars or others globally and present "solutions" to not only the professor but also subject specialists who work in applied environments.

Some significant work on quality and best practices in online learning suggests that five characteristics of course design represent "winning" approaches, not only in terms of effective design but also in terms of learning outcomes. Kumar et al (2019), for example, suggest that these features are generally present in highly successful designs for learning: (a) authentic and relevant course materials that connect to practice; (b) the use of multimedia resources; (c) student creation of digital content both individually and collaboratively; (d)

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student reflection on learning; and (e) the instructors constant connection of work and activity to the meaning and purpose of this learning. These findings are consistent with earlier work (Cundell & Sheppy, 2018; Espiritu & Budhrani, 2019). These studies suggest that online learning designed at nearer the constructivist end of the continuum would be more effective than on the mastery end.

Faculty Archetypes

What follows are brief summaries of the "archetypes" of faculty encountered in a range of institutions, mainly in North America, with whom I have been asked to work since the pandemic caused colleges and universities to shift online. An archetype is "a very typical example" of a certain kind of person – a symbol of a recurrent view or position taken. These are not intended as judgmental: they are encountered types. And reflect various points on the Rogers adoption curve, with a strong weighting towards "laggards" rather than innovators who embrace the creative opportunities afforded by the "new" platforms for learning. In all, there are ten:

1. Some faculty refused to engage in a conversation about teaching and learning online. They reject the idea, especially at a university, that it is possible to "teach" without the students being present. When it is suggested that they are present, just not in the same room, the thought is dismissed. The most common point of dismissal is the absence of non-verbal cues which tell the instructor whether or not a student understands, has issues or is questioning the ideas or information being presented. While they may be required to teach online, they lecture, set readings and assignments, mark and "have done with it".

2. Some faculty say that want to consider new approaches to teaching and learning in an online environment, but in fact have no interest in doing anything differently. Some pay lip-service to ideas such as small group work online, peer to peer assessment, project based learning. But when one reviews their teaching strategy, they "teach as usual". Fear of failure is a bigger factor than hope of success.

3. Some faculty do actually want to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning online, but peer pressure prevents them. In more than one case, a faculty member was close to embracing some new project-based and challenge- based learning but was dissuaded from doing so by others in her own department. Peer pressure to reduce innovative and adaptability was greater than her determination to succeed.

4. Some faculty have good intentions and really do mean to explore alternatives to "traditional" teaching and will suggest great design and development ideas but, when faced with having to actually do it, revert to type. There is a subtle difference between the previous archetype and this one. Here, the pressure to abandon new ideas is entirely within the person – even though they were in days of launching a new course with a startling new approach. "In the end, I just couldn't take the risk". No peer pressure – in fact quite the opposite – but no determination to "dive in" and swim.

5. Some faculty actually begin to work with students in new ways, but when something goes wrong or students push back, they revert to type rather than adapting and modifying their approach "on the fly". Students sometimes do not respond well to courses which demand more of them, especially if they are used to being passive learners working from home mastering content and sending in assignments. Having to engage in dialogue, project work, creation of presentations – all can be challenging. Some faculty, faced with a challenge, balk and reduce their expectations and go back to a more modest shift in their teaching focused on discussion boards and a few student presentations.

6. Some faculty make clear that they don't trust their students to actively engage in learning. "Many of my students will not do well if we ask them to do projects – they are

not used to it"; "I have a lot of students who are international students – they prefer lectures, note-taking and exams"; "I am not sure I would get good work from the students if I took a more "hands-on" approach to learning".

7. Some faculty see content and mastery of content as demonstrated by frequent testing (especially in introductory science) as the only way to teach and can't imagine activities or engaged learning designs that achieve the same outcome. Despite the fact that there is no compelling evidence that traditional face to face teaching produces better outcomes that alternatives, such as online, the myth that it does persists (Abrami, et.al, 2011).

8. Some faculty hide behind the legal or professional requirements associated with their program to provide the shield that prevents them from changing how they teach. They persist in this view even when examples are shown of different approaches taken to the same work for the same professional body at the same level. A classic example of this is an accounting program which has been taught at a distance since 1986 but many of those new to online learning are blissfully unaware of this long history and the modern use of AI-enabled supports for case based accounting teaching. When shown what is possible, they revert to "we couldn't possibly do that in the time available..". Martin Weller has written about this recently (Weller, 2020) suggesting that this is "1999 all over again" with arguments used at that time still in use today, despite the mountain of evidence available to suggest that certification and professional bodies are much more interested in capabilities and competence as outcomes than in how the student got there.

9. Some faculty understand and practice more constructivist approaches to teaching and learning but continue to practice formal assessment of learning through mid-terms and end of term examinations, even though they know these are poor measures of learning and not authentic (Conrad and Opano, 2018). Assessment requirements shape student behaviour. If assessment looks like it does in every other course (e.g. a mid-term and end-of-term exam) and grades for participation are 5-10%, then students will work on the assignments. Constructivist teaching and learning requires authentic assessment, including peer to peer learning and assessment (Topping, 2018). When pushed to explain why, faculty retreat to explanations like "this is what students and used to and expect" and "if I do anything different, I am sure the faculty will have problems".

10. Some faculty embrace the opportunity to re-imagine their teaching, student learning and go "full-on" constructivist and wonder why they had not done this before. This is a small minority of faculty – Rogers (1962) calls these "early adopters", which is how many of these faculty members think of themselves. Yet the early adopters were working on constructivist approaches in 1994 when online learning began and developed the community of inquiry model in 2000 (Garrison, et.al, 2000) and the first constructivist MOOC appeared in Canada in 2008. In many ways, these see themselves as "pioneers" because they are largely unaware of what has gone before.

Others may have other experiences. These are ours. No judgements are implied here. This an account of the archetypes encountered.

IMPLICATIONS

Many who teach in higher education have no qualifications for doing so. In most parts of the world an individual who has technical competencies can teach technical subjects (e.g. trades and apprenticeship skills) and those with a graduate degree are able to teach college and university programs. It is assumed, for example in universities, that a PhD in a specific subject (e.g. medieval history, quantum physics) qualifies a person to teach that subject. The rationale for this approach is the same as the apprenticeship model – as an individual pursued their studies that are "signed off" for their knowledge and expertise by a "journeyman" Pro-

fessor and often secure teaching experience by acting as a teaching assistant. That is enough to be able to replicate the experience for others.

Notice in this "faculty apprenticeship model" that there is no planned exposure to models of learning, best practices in learning design, the psychology or neuroscience of adult learning or the ways of which technologies such as learning management systems, artificial intelligence and analytics can be used to enable effective, engaged and authentic learning. Investments in faculty development, perhaps requiring the completion of a part-time online teaching qualification which demonstrates both an understanding of the theory and evidence-based practice of effective learning may now become an obvious need.

A second implication relates to assessment. It is quite remarkable to those of us who have been engaged in distance education and online learning how little faculty know about authentic assessment, peer assessment and self-managed assessment. It is as if none of the renaissance in assessment over the last twenty five years happened (Conrad & Openo, 2018; Murgatroyd 2018; 2019). There are some significant lessons to be learned from developments in assessment in school systems around the world and from real innovations in authentic assessment and competency-based assessment of skills.

The final implication of this work relates to leadership in colleges and universities. While leaders are often focused on financial, structural, legal and ethical matters, the real focus has now to be on demonstrating educational leadership, especially as it relates to the quality of the learning experience. In one institution it is possible for every course taken by a student to be on a different synchronous platform and a different asynchronous platform; for every course to have different assumptions about the balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning, with some having none of one or other; and for every course to be based on different assumptions about work-loads and volume of "content". Students do not experience a college or university, they are experiencing the whims and constructions of each faculty member. As one faculty member said "its like the wild west – all in the name of academic freedom". The absence of pedagogical leadership and of collaborative professional learning focused on harnessing evidence-based best practice is simply remarkable and also not uncommon.

A university or college may be a co-operative of able persons, but all good co-operatives have values, rigorous systems of operations and a focus on effective practice. Not universities and colleges, it seems. There is much more interest in sustaining "what was" than in working collaboratively on imaging what it possible.

CONCLUSIÓN

This pandemic, as Watters explains (2020), represent the most recent challenge to education where technology "was the answer". It is not. Reimagining the work of learners and engaged teachers is. To avoid "learnification" (Biesta, 2010) where the student is a learning object challenged to master content and complete assessment and instead move to authentic, engaged learning in a post-COVID-19 world, we need a renewal of a passion for learning as an engaged activity, designed by those who know about learning and who engage experts in a field of study to design active learning. Without this change, higher education will, as soon as is humanly possible, return to its practices before COVID-19 no matter how much evidence we can show that these are less effective than they could be (Nichols, 2020). The argument will be: "we tried online learning and it didn't work". Our response should be: "sadly, you did not".

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