



Grounding the curriculum

Sean Dolan

This article argues that with the advent of online learning and the widespread use of discussion forums, there is an opportunity for faculty to encourage students to collaboratively reflect on their own teaching experience from their own unique viewpoints and contexts. Moreover, this shift towards active participation in online discussions has become essential to the student learning experience so that the full range of views and values from an increasingly diverse and non-traditional student base are shared and reflected. In this way it is suggested that traditional notions of curriculum as being defined and controlled by tertiary institutions are being transformed by the grounded experiences of student teacher practice.

Keywords: curriculum, participation, collaboration, cultural diversity

It is widely recognised that online learning has the potential to transform the teaching and learning paradigm in tertiary education (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Traditional understandings of the curriculum as the object of study are being challenged as information technology and the widespread use of web 2.0 software transform the ways that students engage with learning materials and with one another (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). Technological affordances of greater connectivity, participation and collaboration provide faculty with the opportunity to position the student and not the content at the centre of the learning experience (Siemens, 2008). Moreover, as the student body grows increasingly diverse, the need for a culturally inclusive curriculum design has become a central issue for learning (Hannon & D'Netto, 2007). The adoption of asynchronous discussion forums in formal education can be understood as a means of creating a more inclusive design which grounds the curriculum in the students' experiences. While the curriculum may remain static over the duration of the course, the way that it is interpreted and shared by students in discussion forums reflect a more dynamic and relevant approach to student learning.

Constructivist view of the curriculum

The traditional delivery of the curriculum positions students as receivers of information and imposed meanings through pre-packaged authoritative content such as text books or study guides (Boettcher, 2006). Based on principles of behaviourism, transmission metaphors of education view knowledge as being external to the student and transferrable from one person to another (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag, 1995). In contrast, a constructivist approach to online learning is based on the notion that individuals construct their own understandings through experience, maturation, and interaction with the environment, especially active interaction with other learners and the instructor (Rovai, 2007). According to this approach knowledge can be conceived differently by each person (Anson & Miller-Cochran, 2009). Therefore, the defining characteristic of an online constructivist learning environment is dialogue which provides learners with opportunities to articulate their ideas, comment on previous postings and reflect on course content (Rovai, 2007). Discussion forums allow for students as a group to negotiate their own understandings and so the focus is not so much on the curriculum as the object, but students' interpretations of the curriculum based on their own personal experiences in the classroom. This is a very powerful message because it encourages students to regard established theory and concepts as objects to be explored, confirmed, or rejected in the light of experience (Smyth, 1989).

Asynchronous discussion forums have become the most widely adopted tool in online learning and according to Garrison (2003) their use signals a move to "the interactive and constructive potential of asynchronous online learning" (p. 48). Comparing face-to-face with online learning, Swan (2003) found that online discussions are more supportive of experimentation, divergent thinking, exploration of multiple perspectives, complex understanding and reflection. These knowledge and skills can be best elicited from students in lecturer led forums that encourage students to reflect on their own teaching experiences (Richardson & Ice, 2010). A greater disposition to exhibit higher order thinking in asynchronous forums can be partly explained by the time delay between postings which gives participants the opportunity to consider and reflect on their response prior to posting online (Maurino, 2007). In addition, all dialogue in the forums is archived creating a permanent record of students' learning which can be referred to as a means of continual reflection (Lea, 2001). The use of discussion forums allows students to mould and shape their own unique knowledge structures in dialogue with their peers. This means that the curriculum is no longer static or unidirectional, but is constantly evolving, adapting and reflecting a range of contemporary student perceptions and discourse. According to this perspective the formal traditional curriculum is being grounded by student voice and real-world experience. Such a trend in participation "harbinger[s] a radical transformation in who learns from whom, where, under what circumstances, and for what and whose purpose" (Haythornthwaite, 2009, p. 1).

Participation in community building

Effective use of discussion forums encourages the formation of social networks and relations between people. Haythornthwaite (2009) holds that participation connotes contribution to a community whose presence is vital for the effectiveness of online learning, a view supported in numerous studies (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). The forming of community not only has desirable outcomes for affect but also results in a pedagogical shift from focusing on the outcomes of an individual to considering the learning done by the group (Stahl, 2005). Whereas psychological theories of learning focus on the acquisition of knowledge by the individual, a

sociocultural approach conceptualises educational environments as social and cultural situations where individuals and groups construct and express their identities. Social learning theories focus on learning that occurs within a social context and involves personal experiences, observations, and interactions with other individuals (Rovai, 2007). Wenger (1998) considers that learning involves participation in a social world where contribution is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. Included in the community are members at varying levels of knowledge from the novice to the expert and part of the learning process is the novice's socialisation to the group through legitimate peripheral participation. In this way the community as a group evolves and learns, students "create explanations of phenomena that fit their local setting, re-supplying context that is often lost in decontextualised learning, and feeding that information back into the learning environment" (Haythornthwaite, 2009, p. 7).

Collaborative reflective practice

This move towards incorporating reflection and discourse, says Garrison (2006, p. 25), is at "the heart of a meaningful educational experience" and over the past recent decades, the concept of reflection has become a popular and core aspect of the discursive practice of teacher education. The importance of reflection is enshrined in the professional standards for graduating teachers as well as featuring in quality assurance initiatives, course accreditation and teacher selection procedures (Ovens & Tinning, 2009). The origins of the concept of reflective thinking are normally held to derive from Dewey's notion of pragmatic inquiry which posits that all knowledge and theory are ultimately derived from the reflections and experiences of others whose understanding is influenced by their own context, biography and culture. This implies that since all knowledge claims are contingent, new knowledge can only be learned through experiential learning that nurtures reflection on experience and the systematic testing of ideas. Schon extended this interpretation of experiential learning and argued for the promotion of practitioner-derived knowledge which he regarded as being more trustworthy and relevant than received wisdom (as cited in Smyth, 1989). By utilising discussion forums as a way of encouraging collaborative student reflection on teacher practice, the forums become powerful teaching and learning tools because what may be discussed in a forum one day can be applied and put into practice in the practitioner's classroom the next. In forums where there is a range of viewpoints and anecdotes of the student teachers' experiences, prospective teachers can best learn how to critically reflect on practice in social contexts where they have the opportunity to discuss practical problems with other teachers of greater and lesser expertise. Such interactions can not only help them solve immediate problems but also scaffold them from limited to more complex understanding and knowledge about teaching (Dyke, 2009).

Student diversity

Increases in student and cultural diversity emphasise the necessity for change in the way that curriculum is viewed. Curriculum can no longer propose to represent the views and experiences of an increasingly heterogeneous student body. It is widely recognised in teacher education that student teachers often bring with them the prejudices and misconceptions of education that they experienced themselves as students (Braun & Crumpler, 2004). Even when exposed to alternative views and concepts, students will often choose to retain outmoded or old fashioned notions of teaching and learning because to change current thinking requires a significant period of readjustment and confusion (O'Loughlin, 1988). In addition, students' reactions to the

social-constructivist learning environments differ depending on their prior experience and communication norms across cultures. Rovai (2007) explains that teacher and students from a dominant culture may not consider how diverse students' cultural backgrounds affect their way of working on tasks and communication and Catterick (2007) questions whether students from backgrounds where more instructive pedagogies are dominant can adapt to the constructivist approach of online learning.

Increased cultural diversity implies a much wider range of opinions and backgrounds meaning that many of the assumptions and strategies that have been made on the part of the curriculum may run counter to the expectations of students from diverse cultures (Catterick, 2007). Pincas (2001) noted that students entering into professional education in a multicultural context not aligned with their culture can experience significant conflict. This is supported by Edmundson's (2009) claim that "e-learning courses are cultural artefacts, embedded with the cultural values, preferences, characteristics, and nuances of the culture that designed them, and inherently creating challenges for learners from other cultures" (Cultural accessibility). This places greater emphasis on the instructional providers to be acutely aware of their own culture since their world views cannot be separated from the training that they develop (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010). For example one of the principal drivers in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum is the fundamental belief on the role of free play for the child and the facilitating role of the teacher (Ministry of Education, 1996). This runs counter to many assumptions made by individuals who belong to cultures that have a tradition in transmission types of teaching that suppose the teacher to be the source of knowledge and the teacher's role to pass on that knowledge to their students (Hofstede, 1986). Because of the cultural divide, a curriculum that has been devised without awareness of how views and values are culturally specific may not take into account other students difficulty in getting to grips with underlying principles and concepts that drive such an approach to education.

However, in discussion forums this can be made the topic of discussion and learning can be enhanced through a consideration of context, experience and reflection on what the text books articulates and the student teachers own thoughts. In this context aspects of learning are rooted in social interaction and contextually bound by the participants own ability to contribute. Online learning acknowledges that theoretical move away from focusing on the individual's cognitive development and instead recognises the importance of social interaction. Interactive features that allow for Dewey-like reflection and group construction of knowledge are the new curriculum. Through support for these learning activities, the students are grounding the curriculum.

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