Proven Practices for Authentic Instruction and Online Delivery in Higher Education
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Abstract

This paper highlights key lessons presented in *Authentic Instruction and Online Delivery: Proven Practices in Higher Education,* an edited book compiled and produced by faculty members at City University of Seattle (CityU). Emphasizing the value of experience, the book focuses on strategies for real-world, authentic learning; online and hybrid course design and delivery; and topics related to assessment and program revision. With contributions from more than 30 faculty members from varied disciplines, this book includes specific practices proven to help adult students achieve their learning and professional goals.

Introduction

Expectations of teaching institutions are changing. In past decades, these institutions typically focused the majority of their efforts on teaching and learning leaving original research, in large part, to institutions with the resources and programs to support it. However, stakeholder demands are pushing teaching institutions to consider the ways in which they can increase their production of original research. Such stakeholders include accreditation agencies, domestic and international governments, faculty, and even students. Yet, without the budgets, staff, and facilities to produce original research, teaching institutions can be at a disadvantage in this pursuit. In light of these changing research pressures, City University of Seattle (CityU) undertook a project to produce an original collection of proven practices that had been created, verified, and used in the instruction of adult students. This paper highlights the major findings that were discovered through the generation of this book.

Started in September 2010 and completed in June 2011, *Authentic Instruction and Online Delivery: Proven Practices in Higher Education* represents the first time CityU has drawn from its large cadre of practitioner faculty to collect the best ideas that are being used in its courses. The collection includes 26 contributions by faculty members, or teams of faculty members, each detailing a specific, proven practice that has been successful in the classroom or the online environment.

In the evolving world of higher education, discovering and integrating effective new practices, both online and in the classroom, is crucial in preparing today's growing number of adult students for tomorrow's dynamic and evolving workplace. To meet the educational demands of busy adult students, a different instructional approach must be taken. The collection described in this paper was created to enable university instructors everywhere to learn from proven classroom and online experiences, so they may incorporate relevant practices in their own teaching. Presented in three parts, the book primarily addresses authentic instructional strategies and online course delivery with additional chapters on assessment, information literacy, and instructional design.

About CityU

CityU is primarily a teaching institution offering degree programs in professional fields such as business, technology, education, psychology, and communications. It focuses on delivering real-world skills, in an applied manner, that help students achieve professional goals. The vast majority of the university's faculty members are working professionals who

are selected to teach on topics closely related to work they do for a living. Over the years, one of the hallmarks of a CityU education has been the link to real-world applicability that comes from the connections that the university's seven hundred practitioner faculty members bring to their classes.

While the university provides its faculty members with orientations and periodic training, much of what makes these faculty members successful in their classes has come from their own experience, their own proven practices for educating adults. Over the years, it has become evident that the university has accumulated a rich collection of valuable educational strategies that can and should be shared with teaching faculty from similar institutions worldwide. This was the primary driving idea behind the production of the university's first edited volume.

Producing the Collection

In September 2010, the university committed to a project to gather and publish its first collection of proven practices; it was to be the university's first book in a series of annual volumes addressing contemporary topics in higher education. A call for proposals was issued to university faculty and staff that resulted in approximately 50 submissions. Of these, 35 were accepted resulting in 28 completed chapters. Two chapters were eliminated for qualitative reasons. The editors revised the remaining 26 that were included in the final book, which was published in June 2011 and made available to the higher education community through the self-publishing division of Amazon.com.

Most of the chapters that made up the collection covered proven practices that had been successful at helping adult students achieve their learning and professional goals. Rather than reporting on educational research and theory, these chapters covered teaching methodologies that CityU faculty members were willing to share so that other university instructors would be able to learn from their experiences.

As the book came together, a few general themes emerged. The first theme centered on methods of authentic instruction, or the various ways in which learning can be tied to real-world applicability. The practices appeared in part one. The second theme that emerged was online delivery. As a pioneer in online instruction, CityU faculty members were able to draw upon years of experience as they shared proven practices that prepare their students for the future, as technology continues to impact the way online education is designed and delivered. These online practices were covered in part two. A final theme that emerged was in learning assessment and program revision.

The sections that follow will provide a synopsis of the strategies related to authentic instruction and online course delivery. These first two sections made up the majority of the book and contain the most useful insights. They provide information regarding a collection of proven practices and indicate how each might be useful to faculty members serving diverse student populations around the world.

Authentic Instruction

The goal of authentic instruction is to create learning opportunities that resemble real-world application. In a classroom environment that supports authentic learning, students are able to put new material to immediate use because it is taught in a manner that closely resembles the way it will be used in the real world. Depending on the discipline, many methods are available to facilitate authentic instruction. These include strategies that help students construct meaning, conduct learning inquiries and self-reflection, and inspire

students to take action to address real-world problems. Several specific strategies to support authentic instruction and learning will be discussed in the sections to follow.

Constructivism and authenticity. Constructivism and authenticity are effective ways to reinforce authentic learning. Both can be achieved in higher education through the use of current events, including breaking news stories. Used in communications courses, including media and society, intercultural communication, and public relations, this practice is also relevant to social studies, education, psychology, and management courses. Learning through real-world events engages students and faculty alike because they are applying concepts and theories to real topics requiring real solutions, decision-making skills, and ethical and critical thinking. Embedding this practice into pedagogical theory enhances the authenticity of the practice itself.

Constructivism, as a theory of knowledge and of learning, is also a teaching practice. A broad term with several strands of thought, constructivism has been viewed as psychological and sociological. The main components of constructivism include meaning making, critical thinking, and the active role of the student. Brommer (2011) and Szyarto (2011) provide support for the use of constructivist theory both in the construction of practical and higher order learning demonstrating that a constructivist approach can be useful at many different levels in higher education (Brommer, 2011).

Inquiry learning. Another method of ensuring authentic instruction is to utilize inquiry learning. Founded on the scientific inquiry method, inquiry learning allows students to gain a clear understanding of topics by constructing and conducting inquiries to discover knowledge thus allowing them to incorporate that knowledge into their world views. This approach advocates active, hands-on learning, as opposed to the traditional model of lecture and recall.

The role of the instructor in an inquiry-learning model is to provide the opportunity for meaningful inquiry and then to facilitate the students' discovery process. Because of the individual way in which knowledge is assimilated, it is primarily up to the student to make the experience meaningful for him/herself. The instructor becomes the guide to the students' learning process but does not determine the learning outcome (Gunhold, 2011).

Self-reflection. Self-reflection is the process by which students are allowed and encouraged to become conscientious learners. In such environments, the learner is asked to consider the learning process and assess the extent to which that process has been successful or meaningful. Reflecting on the assimilation of new knowledge and its impact is a key part of authentic instruction (Chuprina & Zaher, 2011).

Self-reflection is important to the adult learner on two levels. First, the specific course content must be considered to ensure that the learner has a clear understanding of its meaning. But, perhaps equally important is the opportunity to understand what that content means in terms of one's cognitive view. How has the new knowledge impacted one's existing view of a particular field? Does the new knowledge support existing viewpoints or create cognitive dissonance that must be resolved? And to what extent will this prepare the student for additional learning? Self-reflection can be an important method for answering these questions.

Self-direction. Adults become self-directed learners to fulfill a personal and intrinsic desire to gain knowledge. The reasons behind self-directed learning are varied and multi-dimensional, but the key element is an individually motivated desire to learn and this desire can be a significant part of the process of authentic instruction.

No two learners approach self-directed learning in the same way (Brocket & Hiemstra, 1991), and this requires numerous methods and mechanisms to support individual lifelong learning. Alternative learning delivery methods, such as online or hybrid learning environments, can promote self-directed learning and offer innovative structures for those individuals driven to seek new knowledge. A variety of theoretical insights help to explain the advantages and barriers associated with self-direction in adult learning.

Curriculum designers and university faculty, who are interested in authentic instruction, can take advantage of motivated adult learners by understanding the different issues related to their learning. Despite the wide range of differences among adult students, self-directed learners exhibit common characteristics. Penland (1979) described self-directed learners as ones who set their own pace by using their own style of learning within their own structures. Knowles (2002) pointed out that adult learners need to know what they are learning, why it is important, and how it will be useful. A number of opinions exist regarding the best ways to administer and deliver programs based on authentic instruction for self-directed adults, but these varying approaches share the same need to provide motivated learners with the knowledge and skills that they can apply directly and quickly in the pursuit of personal goals.

Employing proper curriculum design and delivery methods is key to meeting the needs of self-directed learners. More attention has been given to the way that instruction is delivered, as student-focused, activity-driven, authentic instruction has emerged to take the place of the traditional lecture-centric model (King, 1993). This shift has been driven by an emergent belief that real learning only happens when students have the ability to engage with material directly. "When students are engaged in actively processing information by reconstructing that information in such new and personally meaningful ways, they are far more likely to remember it and apply it in new situations" (King, 1993, p. 30).

<u>Linking courses to the workplace.</u> Teaching working professionals through authentic instruction assumes that instructors and students collaborate in the learning process that students are able to apply new knowledge to the workplace immediately, and that instructors guide students in learning new material while also demonstrating how that material can be used for professional advancement. Such assumptions set the foundation for instruction that directly links learning in the classroom to performance on the job.

The ability of an instructor to design authentic instruction that models the demands of the workplace will enhance the students' understanding of the professional relevance of the coursework. Such a learning environment avoids an over-emphasis on lecture and reading and, instead, requires students, either individually or in groups, to produce work that resembles or directly models the demands that will be placed on them in a current or future job. The challenge in this area is to ensure that the instructor has current knowledge of and experience in a particular field to provide authentic instruction that is relevant to that field (Diamond, 2011).

<u>Inspiring action and service learning.</u> Another mechanism that can be used for authentic instruction is to engage students in learning that inspires them to take real-world action. Through careful course design, students can learn about important issues concerning such things as the environment, social justice, or ethics, which can then lead them to take action to address these issues in the real world. The authentic instruction is reinforced as students are able to capitalize on new knowledge in their efforts to take inspired action.

Related to instruction that inspires action is the use of service learning. Service Learning is an academic model providing students and faculty hands-on experiences and an opportunity to develop in-depth knowledge and skills through projects aimed at identifying

and meeting real community needs. Service Learning provides students the opportunity to combine, utilize, and apply skills and concepts developed in the classroom along with acquired personal and professional knowledge in real-world projects. This method is considered a form of experiential learning and is often described by professionals and students as a "hands-on," practical form of learning (Watkins & Braun, 2009). Students engaging in service learning projects link classroom instruction to real-world application as they dedicate their efforts to social reform projects, thereby reinforcing learning in a meaningful way. It is a clear example of authentic instruction as students are learning as they are acting on behalf of their communities (Kelley, 2011).

Both inspired action and service learning give students the opportunity to engage in instruction that is authentic in structure and provides them with a sense of relevance and importance related to their learning.

Online and Hybrid Delivery

Online and hybrid instructional delivery methods have become as common as in-class sessions. Yet many differing viewpoints are circulating regarding the best way to deliver online instruction. There are also many varying opinions regarding the legitimacy of online instruction when compared to traditional in-class formats. What can be agreed upon is that online instruction is here to stay.

Most would agree that to be effective, online instructors cannot merely transfer in-class activities to an online format. Online learning is a completely different methodology that involves the use of tools and strategies not found in traditional classrooms. Discussion boards, virtual team projects, interactions with and among remote students, and course cohesion are only a few of the aspects of online learning that require additional attention from faculty skilled in the use of this delivery method.

Many instructors who lead online courses have developed a number of strategies intended to ensure that students learn as much in an online course as they might in a traditional classroom. The practices reviewed in this section are some of the strategies that, through experience, have proven to be useful in educating online students (Flores, 2011).

Online and hybrid program design and delivery. Many researchers have engaged in controversial discussions on the philosophical approaches to learning in online and hybrid formats. Debates continue on the effectiveness, benefits, and limitations of online and hybrid delivery, and faculty and students continue to challenge curricular approaches in these formats.

Historically, curriculum design in all delivery modes has followed a pedagogical, or teacher-centered, framework (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). Since the late 1970s, the leaders of some nontraditional institutions have shifted the curriculum design to reflect the classic works of Knowles (1980) on the needs of adult learners through student-centered learning, or andragogy. As access to technology has increased, curriculum design discussions have evolved to include ways to enhance the online experience by offering multiple pathways to obtain content and feedback (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006).

In 2003, 34 percent of institutions of higher education in the United States offered complete online degree programs (Allen & Seaman, 2005). Some schools have online programs with the same requirements, classes, and teachers as their traditional programs. The alternative is attractive for many students, including the minimally tapped market of students who have little time but have the funds, as online programs typically cost more than traditional classroom programs (Endres, Chowdhury, Frye, & Hurtubis, 2009). Curriculum developers in online and hybrid programs need to be aware of the benefits and challenges that

come with distance learning and should become familiar with strategies that have historically been successful in overcoming the challenges.

Additionally, online and hybrid programs have been shown to promote learning effectiveness when online learning is blended with local experiences. This approach accommodates diverse student populations and learning styles and allows theory and practice to be combined with locally relevant issues providing real-world learning experiences (Moloney, Hickey, Bergin, Boccia, & Polley, 2007). As an example, at CityU courses and programs are taught at multiple campuses around the world. With online and hybrid course offerings, students are able to choose the delivery mode most compatible with their learning preferences and learn from instructors located in other countries. Many CityU students appreciate collaborating with students and faculty members who bring international perspectives from across borders. Students can choose to travel to other countries to engage in international learning or learn online from geographically dispersed instructors who bring real-world, international experiences to the online classroom.

From an instructor or program manager's perspective, the following benefits of offering courses in online or hybrid formats have been documented: (a) improved faculty support, (b) effective delivery of student assistance, (c) increased ability to share electronic course materials, (d) greater sharing of faculty workload, (e) promotion of virtual learning communities, (f) increased facilitation of student feedback, and (g) more effective program management (Tang & Byrne, 2007). Yet there remain questions about the value of online programs from both instructors' and students' perspectives. These questions may impact the extent to which faculty embrace this delivery method and, also, the level of motivation that students bring to online courses.

Strategies for motivating online students. Students who are accustomed to traditional classroom formats may be reticent to participate in a course that is delivered in an online or hybrid format. One method to address this is to require participation through curriculum design. Engagement in online activities could simply be included as one of the required and graded assessments and students would regard it as more or less important depending on the percentage of the final grade that their participation accounted for. This approach, while successful in driving student participation, may present other problems and most likely will result in compliance-level engagement in discussions or online activities. Additionally, the quality of student contributions may not be as high as it could be if instructors were to use other, more positive methods of motivating and engaging students (Cholewinska, 2011).

Highly successful instructors do not rely solely on curriculum requirements to create a quality class. They engage students in activities and are actively involved in the facilitation of discussions. They post interesting and complex questions, show other aspects of discussed topics, incorporate new ideas, provide real-life applications, and share their own professional experiences in discussions as they work to create a supportive classroom environment.

Quantity and quality of student interaction in online courses depends on the active engagement of instructors and on the quality of the instructors' engagement. Instructors cannot limit their interactions to scattered and short comments to students. Their role as facilitators starts with soliciting complex and interesting problems or questions that compel students to use course concepts and to make references to concepts learned in previous courses or professional experiences. Moreover, the instructor's role involves moving discussions to a deeper level by emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of students' approaches and alternative viewpoints, as well as the results and the importance of their original perspectives. Simultaneously, instructors facilitating online activities advocate clarity of response by persuading students to elaborate in their posts. As Maor (2003) pointed out, online instructors need to be ready to intervene in the discussion when it stalls or goes off

track and ensure that student postings are professional, scholarly, and serve as experiences that connect the students to one another.

Students in classes with active facilitation of discussion are often more engaged than those in sections with less attentive instructors. It is clear that the role of the instructor, as well as the design of the course, play key roles in the level of motivation for online students. This is important for instructors as well as for instructional designers (Cholewinska, 2011).

Using technology in online and hybrid courses. Another primary concern related to the design and delivery of online or hybrid courses is the specific type of platform and technology tools used. The technologies used in online classes can be grouped into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous (Hrastinski, 2008). Synchronous learning requires all learners and instructors to be present at the same time. Classes are delivered through technologies such as web conferencing and live streaming, which allow users to connect into a live web conference. Asynchronous learning allows users to access material from a central site with no designated time assigned to it. E-mail, message boards, and blogs are common modes of asynchronous communications (Hrastinski, 2008).

The use of technology in online courses can enhance the learning experience. A variety of technologies exist that can be used to create an interactive personal classroom, including options for sharing audio and video to enhance adult learning in online modalities. Many studies have been conducted or are currently underway to determine the optimal ways that these technologies, including other emergent tools, can be used to advance authentic instructional methods (Minor, 2011).

Some researchers argue, however, that the online classroom, even when supported by innovative technology, cannot be compared to a traditional classroom experience. These authors propose that the online classroom experience lacks vital elements necessary for an effective learning experience, leaving students less engaged or motivated in the learning process (Bigelow, 1999; Clark, 2001; MacKinnon, 2000; Ponzurick., 2000). Other authors support the equivalency theory (Simonson, Schlosser, & Hanson, 1999), which states that the closer the online classroom is to the traditional classroom, the more the results will emulate one another. Therefore, the results of face-to-face contact in a traditional classroom as compared to face-to-face contact via a form of technology should result in similar outcomes. If technology is used appropriately, the online experience can be at least as rich as the traditional classroom (Brower, 2003; Minor, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper summarized the key findings presented in a collection of proven practices gathered by the faculty and staff at City University of Seattle. This collection represents a unique compilation of strategies that can be employed by instructors at other teaching institutions around the world. Within the realm of authentic instruction, faculty and course designers can utilize constructivism and authenticity, inquiry learning, self-reflection, and self-direction. They can also utilize strategies to link coursework to the workplace as well as designing instruction that inspires students to take action to improve their communities. All of these authentic instructional strategies can be employed in online or hybrid courses where proper student motivation and the utilization of technology can greatly enhance the student experience.

The strategies briefly described in this paper are described in much more detail in the 26 chapters that are found in *Authentic Instruction and Online Delivery: Proven Practices in Higher Education.* As indicated above, this collection was intended to be an experienced-based repository of strategies to be used with adult students. If experience is the best teacher,

then proven practices, developed through instructor experience, have much to offer both novice and veteran educators.

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