Chapter XIV

New Wine or New Bottles:
What’s New about Online Teaching?

Michael Forret, University of Waikato, New Zealand
Elaine Khoo, University of Waikato, New Zealand
Bronwen Cowie, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract

This chapter presents findings from research into the nature of successful, online tertiary teaching and learning. The project is part of a larger study aimed at establishing guidelines for the ongoing design and development of online courses within the authors’ institution. The research findings, from interviews with tertiary online teachers, identify key characteristics of successful online teaching and learning that are consistent with a sociocultural view of learning. The authors recognize that online teaching and learning contexts present challenges for both teachers and learners but argue that quality pedagogy is founded on a well-considered view of learning and that the guiding pedagogical principles provided by such a view...
apply equally well in online and face-to-face contexts. Thus, they caution against confusing the need to respond flexibly to changing environments with the need for a new philosophy of learning.

Introduction

While it is clear that online technologies, through their greater facility for communication and interactivity, offer a wider repertoire of teaching opportunities than traditional forms of distance education (Curran, 2001), how this potential can be best realized for a particular educational task and student population remains the subject of continuing debate and research (Clark, 1994; Curran, 2001; Gibson, 1998; Windschitl, 1998). Recent reexamination of the development of online teaching and learning has underscored the importance of the teacher’s role (Matuga, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Salmon, 2000) as well as the differences between face-to-face and online teaching (Frey & Alman, 2001). La Monica (2001) comments that “teaching online is a new and different experience from teaching in a classroom. It requires a different set of skills and a different pedagogy,” and (Ells, 1999) has coined the term “webagogy” to describe the “art, craft, and science of using networked technologies, including the World Wide Web, to support teaching and learning.”

It seems clear that learning to teach and learn in an asynchronous, online situation, as with any new context, requires both teachers and learners to develop new skills and strategies in order to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by these new learning contexts. Whether online teaching and learning requires us to redefine the principles guiding our pedagogy is, however, debatable. There is a danger that the novelty of the technologies used today may give rise to the impression that teachers need to develop completely new pedagogical principles in order to use the technology effectively—we question whether this is, in fact, so. We feel that pedagogy should be defined and guided by a well-articulated view of learning and the aims and intentions promoted by that view, and that these guiding principles remain constant regardless of context. While the strategies and skills developed to deal effectively with new teaching situations are clearly important, these strategies and skills derive their character and purpose from the teacher’s underlying views of learning and associated aims and intentions. For this reason, the most important aspect of pedagogy is the establishment of its underlying guiding principles.

Moore (1998) argues that, while the opportunities of distance education have never been greater, neither has the gap of understanding between those who know how to design and deliver quality distance education programs and the policymakers and administrators who talk about the need for distance education. He goes on to say,
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