Chapter XIII

Understanding Roles within Technology Supported Teaching and Learning: Implications for Staff, Academic Units, and Institutions

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Abstract

This chapter provides a case study of a postgraduate course focused on network-based learning, which from its original design was based on constructivist learning principles. Over time, this course has evolved to incorporate increasing use of learning technology — particularly, synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. This evolution has led to a reappraisal and less emphasis on face-to-face class meetings. The course has also increased its student base through distance and offshore offerings. These shifts have translated into changes in the way the course is resourced in both human and
infrastructure terms. The case uses Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, and Tickner’s (2001) roles and responsibilities of an online teacher to analyse the teaching team’s perspective on the resource implications of a move to increased technology-facilitated teaching and learning for the teaching staff, the academic department, and the institution.

Introduction

Technology-supported learning in higher education is often considered hand-in-hand with changing pedagogical approaches and styles from instructive to more constructivist views of teaching and learning (Owston, 1997; Reeves & Reeves, 1997). This is understandable since the early adoption of online technologies coincided with general calls for higher education teaching to move from teacher-directed to learner-centred pedagogical approaches (Ramsden, 1992). Thus, in the literature of online teaching and learning, the changed role of the teacher is often discussed in terms of changing pedagogical style. In this context, moving online has been conceptualised as a change from traditional, teacher-directed, face-to-face classes to innovative, learner-centred online experiences (Herrington & Oliver, 2001).

This has made it somewhat difficult to determine which changes to practice occur because of changes in pedagogy and which occur because teaching and learning is now mediated by online technologies. Little is known about the changing role of the teacher when courses already based on constructivist learning principles are adapted to make use of (or greater use of) technology. In order to disentangle the issue of changing pedagogy and increasing technology use, it is necessary to explore what happens when a course underpinned by a constructivist approach evolves from primarily face-to-face to primarily online delivery. This analysis enables the authors to examine the characteristics of online teaching practice.

Background

As teaching and learning in higher education has increasingly moved from face-to-face classes to online interaction, teachers have been coming to terms with what this means for how they go about their work. From the outset of online education, observations have been made about how it has changed the environment for teachers and learners (Collis, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Commentators, practitioners, and researchers have for some time been trying to identify the particular skills and competencies required by a good online teacher or facilitator (cf. Berge, 1995). More recently, Salmon (2000) has suggested that there are five characteristics demonstrated by effective e-moderators: understanding the online environment; technical proficiency with the software tools; skills to