Chapter VI

Using an Audience Response System to Enhance Student Engagement in Large Group Orientation: A Law Faculty Case Study

Sally Kift, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Abstract

This chapter discusses an innovative use of an audience response system (ARS) to address the vexed learning and teaching problem of how to manage effective student engagement in large group academic Orientation sessions. Having particular regard to the research that informs transition practice to enhance the first-year experience, the chapter addresses the pedagogical basis for the decision to adopt the ARS technology as integral to the learning design deployed. The Orientation exemplar discussed is drawn from practice in a law faculty; however, the general approach illustrated is capable of replication regardless of discipline or institution. In the hope that this case study might be transferred to other applications, the enactment of the learning design involving the ARS is described, and an analysis of the evaluation conducted is also presented.

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Introduction: A Learning and Teaching Problem

Bass (1999) has usefully drawn attention to the difference it makes to have a “problem” in research (a problem in research being the necessary prerequisite to the start of the investigative process), to that of having a “problem” in learning and teaching (which is usually conceptualised as some form of failure that requires immediate remedial action): “[c]hanging the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about” (Bass, Introduction, para. 1).

This chapter will describe a learning and teaching problem that has continually vexed my faculty at the commencement of every new teaching period. How do we engage our large and diverse student cohort in their transition to their first year of tertiary study, at that first point of critical faculty contact — the all-too-brief academic orientation session — when everything can coalesce to militate against students making the requisite cognitive connection with the important, “start-up” messages we seek to convey? As encouraged by Shulman (1998, p. 6), this teaching scholarship publication will present a “public account of … the full act of teaching [involved] — vision, design, enactment, outcomes, and analysis — in a manner susceptible to critical review by … professional peers and amendable to productive employment in future work by members of that same community.”

This case study will describe the pedagogical approach that has been adopted to harness the technological affordances presented by an audience response system ARS as applied in the context of first year orientation for two distinct groups: internal students (n~350) and external students (n~110). The orientation exemplar discussed is drawn from practice in a law faculty; however, the general approach illustrated can be applied regardless of discipline or institution. This particular ARS application is one aspect of an integrated package of transition strategies, deployed throughout the course of the whole transition year, for the benefit of the first year student in law (that has been more fully described elsewhere (Kift, 2004)). It has been designed specifically to take account of the reality that, as the faculty’s Assistant Dean, Teaching & Learning, the author is only one in a progression of “talking heads” attempting to connect with new students in an intense two-hour faculty orientation session. In designing for learning in this unique and quite fraught environment, the necessity to place the learners’ needs as central to the learning design is paramount (as should always be the case), while the focus on the technologies and delivery approaches is a secondary consideration. The particular context for the learning — orientation — requires careful thought, including especially “who the learners are” and what prior knowledge, learning styles, expectations/misconceptions, and goals they bring with them to the learning environment. In this latter regard, there is much that we already know about transition complicators and other obstacles faced by at-risk groups and students generally that are likely to impede their retention, progress, or learning success: much research on which we can draw in this regard has been conducted in relation to the “first year experience” (FYE). This chapter will briefly discuss that body of knowledge, as it has influenced the transition pedagogy deployed.
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