Chapter I

What is an Authentic Learning Environment?

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Abstract

Recent research and learning theory provides a wealth of thought, ideas and strategies to inform the design and implementation of learner-centered, realistic and effective learning environments. This chapter proposes guidelines for designing authentic learning environments for higher education that can be applied across a range of disciplines and in a variety of modes. Characteristics of the approach are explored in depth, and the chapters of the book are introduced as examples of authentic learning environments in diverse subject areas and contexts. The chapter provides a practical framework for teachers wishing to break away from traditional, teacher-centered approaches in higher education, and who are willing to create learning environments where students are motivated to learn in rich, relevant and real-world contexts.
Toward Authenticity in Higher Education

Take a walk around most university campuses and observe what you see in the way of adult teaching and learning. If you are fortunate, you will find students engaged in motivating and challenging activities that require collaboration and support. The tasks the students do reflect the tasks seen in real professions and workplaces, and the problems they solve are complex and sustained, requiring intensive effort.

For most students at university today, the reality is very different. Large lecture theatres, centre-staged with discipline experts, continue to transmit theoretical knowledge in bite-sized chunks for passive learners to receive and consume. Collaboration is not encouraged or required. If it occurs at all, it is sought subversively among students away from the formality of the lecture halls.

So, why is the second scenario the more probable one to encounter?

The approach taken by many teachers in universities today is simply a result of the way they were taught. They are perpetuating a tradition of formal university teaching that has ignored the substantial insights gained from more recent theory and research into the way people learn. Typically, university education has been a place to learn theoretical knowledge devoid of context. Essentially, for students, this has meant that their teachers transmit the facts and skills that they are required to absorb and regurgitate on exams. Textbooks and lecture notes are the main resources for study, with the practice of “cramming” for exams a common learning strategy. Retention and transfer of knowledge was assumed but rarely assessed. For many students a “surface” approach to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976) assured success. It is not surprising that a growing proportion of graduates now choose to follow their university courses with practical courses at vocationally oriented institutions (Golding & Vallence, 1999).

In the wider community it has become increasingly clear to employers of university graduates and governments that fund universities that university learning outcomes are lacking, and no longer meet the needs of a dynamic and changing workforce. What employers, governments and nations require are graduates that display attributes necessary for knowledge building communities: graduates who can create, innovate, and communicate in their chosen profession.

If traditional approaches to university education do not result in appropriate learning outcomes, what then are the teaching and learning approaches that universities should adopt? The growing influence of constructivism as a philosophical approach to learning, and a wide range of research studies and papers investigating alternative models of teaching and learning over the last decade,
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