Chapter 1

Developing Faculty to Integrate Innovative Learning into Their Practice with the SOLE Model

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ABSTRACT

A subtle blend of institutional approaches, customised to each institution, is necessary if the challenge of adopting the very best of educational technologies to meet the demands of new emerging generations of learners is to be met. The Student-Owned Learning-Engagement (SOLE) model is suggested as providing one possible institutional solution. The Net generation, both in its mythological state and its rudimentary reality, presents a challenge to contemporary universities, to teach in increasingly diverse ways, to increasingly diverse populations. Senior university leaders and faculty must acknowledge that the very nature of knowledge creation, stewardship, and propagation has changed. Faculty, trained in one epistemological universe, must be supported in adapting their skills to a new one.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter identifies the myths that inform, and mis-inform, current policy, the actual challenges that result, and suggests a model that supports a professional, disciplined and sustainable response on the part of educators. The SOLE model is proposed as one means to meet this challenge. It builds on the educational theories that have dominated the last 70 years of higher education in the Anglo-Saxon world and much of Western Europe. Cognizant of behaviourist, cognitivist, and constructivist theories of learning, the SOLE model provides an opportunity to evaluate the conditions, identify strategies, and monitor performance of teaching and learning with each subsequent cohort, or generation of students. It supports a model of learning design that accommodates innovative
Developing Faculty to Integrate Innovative Learning into Their Practice with the SOLE Model

methods, using emerging technologies, as readily as it supports ‘traditional’ models of classroom practice. It exposes existing pedagogic practice and suggests, but does not restrict, the initiative of the learning designer. It seeks to identify and support the learner’s characteristics, self-understanding, and metacognitive development, and allow these to determine the learning process. It is intended to be suitable for this ‘generation’ and all those that come after.

BACKGROUND

There is a clear need for higher education to be responsive to its current learners’ needs and for faculty to be supported in this process. Contemporary developments require the support of new models of academic practice and new approaches to learning. We must first clarify what, if anything, is genuinely new about our current cohorts of learners and then look for approaches to learning design that are capable of accommodating current and future changes.

It is unwise to suggest that an entire generation is digitally wired, connected and digitally literate, indeed the evidence suggests the contrary (Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010). While it produces useful headlines and clear policy options, it does not necessarily produce effective education. Each course design, each member of faculty, needs the skills to profile, identify, and empathise with each subsequent cohort. Each course of study must be responsive, appropriate, and supportive of cohorts emerging and evolving modes of learning behaviour.

I would contest the notion that this generation is any more unique than any previous generation, or indeed the notion of a generation at all, but I support the need for pedagogical practices, resources, and faculty development that seeks to understand and optimize learning for contemporary learners, digital or otherwise. Institutions everywhere are challenged by the need to provide increasingly personalised learning experiences for increasingly diverse cohorts of students. This pressure, from national government policymakers worldwide and university managers, and indirectly from students themselves, is one that individual academics can either choose to resist, to embrace, or feel afflicted by. The individual response and the institutional response are often in disharmony. The question of whether it is appropriate to ‘develop’ existing and new academics to integrate e-learning into their practice is worth exploring. There is a danger that ‘developing’ suggests that this is something that requires additional effort, that it is not in the normal manner of things. Likewise, to suggest that this applies to existing and new academics rather than simply to refer to all academics, also implies that our current situation is something extraordinary. We might also take issue with the notion of ‘to integrate,’ which again implies that there is something ‘other’ that needs to be incorporated into established or recognised practice.

Our physical classrooms, our teaching spaces, laboratories, seminar rooms and lecture theatres have not undergone significant change. The assumptions on the part of both teachers and students of the nature of learning that takes place in these well-established, and well understood spaces, have been difficult to challenge. Indeed, it is remarkable how enduring these images of educational spaces are. The promise of technology-enhanced mega-universities designed to meet the needs of a growing global population of aspiring graduates (Daniel, 1996) appears to be stubbornly resisted by universities. For example, despite being freed of all the constraints of physical reality universities still persist in building large virtual 3-D representations of traditional lecture theatres in Second Life (www.secondlife.com). In this context, the question of academic development is a highly pertinent one. The e-learning agenda has demonstrated, perhaps more clearly than any other change in the educational space, how ill prepared many faculty are to teach in the contemporary environment in which they find themselves. Technology has become a
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