

People, pedagogy and the power of connection

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Abstract

The profile and fabric of adult learners in higher education is changing and becoming more diverse. Supporting these students in their learning journey needs to go beyond the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities, requiring a paradigm shift in pedagogical approach. In this paper, two tertiary educators from a regional Australian university share how they not only support adult learners enrolled both locally and globally but also help them to connect effectively with course content and with each other. One author, working primarily in undergraduate education courses, has proposed a “Winning Formula” approach to her pedagogy with an emphasis on student engagement, contextualised learning and an extensive choice of learning resources. The second author, who works online with postgraduate learners, shares outcomes of her research in online design with a focus on the principle of the “CHE factor” (qualities of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy) which she has found is the central tenet of effective online learning and teaching. As a result of a categorical analysis of multiple data sources from their individual research activities, the two authors were able to identify a number of shared learning and teaching principles which they have found support learners in making connections between their learning and the real world environments in which they live and work. Principles, however, cannot exist in a vacuum and need to be considered according to the educational contexts within which they are applied. The authors reflect on these key principles and the application to their own teaching contexts and share some anecdotal comments from students. The paper concludes with an invitation to others to consider the application (and possible adaptation) of the principles to their own educational contexts.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

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ISSN 1832-2050

Introduction

The demographics and fabric of adult learners enrolled in higher education, particularly over the last decade, has changed dramatically (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The globalisation of universities and the ease of access to online courses mean that locally, nationally and internationally, students are enrolling from a diverse range of contexts. In this paper, ‘context’ is taken to mean a unique set of conditions or circumstances that operate on, or are embedded in, the

life of an individual, group, a situation, or event that gives meaning to its interpretation (Brown, 2008; Lawrence, 2006; Oers, 1997).

Australia attracts a significant percentage of the international market of students enrolled in higher education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2010). Not only has there been an increase in the number of international, distance, female and mature-aged students enrolling to study in higher education, but students from a range of socio-economic and multi-cultural backgrounds are also making up significant numbers of our cohorts. Whilst full-time school leavers may once have been the majority of students in classrooms, there is no longer one ‘norm’ or type of student enrolled in tertiary study (Bradley et al., 2008, see student profile table, p. 70).

Online programs, multiple course offerings and modes of study (full-time, part-time, online and intensive programs) now enable students to learn in a range of remote and vastly different geographic locations and contexts. Tertiary institutions’ competition for a piece of the competitive domestic and international market means that attracting and supporting students in terms of equity, access, service, delivery, academic achievement and quality learning and teaching have become imperatives (Australian Government, 2009).

Responding to the diverse student cohort

Students of increasingly diverse backgrounds bring to the learning environment not only personal experiences, perceptions and expectations of what tertiary education means to them, but may also connect differently to the courses and course content. Responding competitively to this diverse student cohort and providing effective and equitable learning and teaching opportunities requires fundamental changes to the nature of study materials, university protocols, expectations for engagement and the overall student experience (Australian Government, 2009; Jones, Ladyshevsky, Oliver, Flavell, & Geoghegan, 2008; Krizek, Birnbaum, & Levinson, 2004; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003). The proactive inclusion of a range of pedagogical strategies and processes that acknowledge the contexts, contribution and circumstances of all students is not only necessary but ethically responsible (Jones et al., 2008). Providing a more seamless transition between personal and educational contexts through contextualised learning is a significant step and a proactive and strategic response to these trends. It is also an imperative for the sustainability of the learning institution (Jones et al., 2008).

Institutions recognise that they need to move beyond simply maintaining optimum enrolments, and onto reconceptualising and re-examining pedagogical positions and practices (Santiago, 2008). Their renewed focus on student learning emphasises those processes that are in place to support, communicate and educate students for optimum learning outcomes (Dashwood, Lawrence, Brown, & Burton, 2008). At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), this shift in focus is evident in the mission statement where USQ aims to provide “quality professional education opportunities that are accessible, flexible and borderless” (USQ, 2010). Key USQ organisational goals include “enhancing teaching performance and to provide high quality, flexible and inclusive learning experiences that promote lifelong learning, critical enquiry and students’ career opportunities”.

In this paper, two USQ educators share their distinct yet pedagogically similar learner-centred approaches to supporting their students in making connections between their learning, each other and the real world contexts in which they live

and work. The authors also discuss the process of how they made these comparisons and how the emerging principles they have defined may be of value to or applicable in other educational contexts.

The winning formula

It is important that an effective approach to adult education and learning be based on sound pedagogical principles that underpin course development, teaching and support (Danaher, 2001). Further to this, a supportive learning and teaching environment (whether students are studying on campus or externally) needs to be strategically structured and nurtured (Reushle, 2005). The Winning Formula (Brown, 2008) is Author 1's attempt to respond to the changing needs and expectations of students whilst also exploring how students learn and the outcomes of student learning in tertiary education. The Winning Formula is the name given to both a unique approach to supporting, motivating and enhancing the student learning journey, as well as a motivating recorded presentation that is a lynch pin or gateway for students commencing the courses facilitated by the author. The Winning Formula challenges the view that learning is just acquiring knowledge, skills and outcomes, and instead provides a pedagogical approach that acknowledges contextualisation and ensures students feel connected and part of a team of learners and that the richness of their backgrounds is valued.

The framework is a conscious shift from an instructional focus to a learning paradigm that ensures course materials support the individual and their multiple learning styles. This is achieved by offering a smorgasbord of resources from which students can select and engage with to help connect with and make meaning of a course. This approach offers maximum resource flexibility including online materials, recorded presentations and Camtasia (video capture) presentations, podcasts and online discussion forums to back up hard copy and online study materials. The Winning Formula PowerPoint presentation is added to the online course environments at the beginning of each semester and used as an ice-breaker activity to set the scene for the forthcoming semester's work. This provides a critical step in assuring students that they are supported and valued and helps make explicit the roles and expectations of all parties in ensuring that the course is productive, meaningful and engaging. This paper focuses on two of the four principles that help to facilitate the shift towards this learning and teaching paradigm. These are: the importance of contextual application and relevancy; and the provision of resources to suit a range of learning styles to motivate students to engage with course content, concepts and each other.

Contextualised application and relevance

As retention continues to be benchmarked on quality teaching and universities vie to attract students, pedagogical practices that recognise, celebrate and build upon students' backgrounds, values, prior experience and contexts are recommended (Elson-Green, 2007). A critical aspect of addressing these factors is ensuring that courses are facilitated in ways that students perceive relevant to their context, and in which their cultural attributes are acknowledged (Kuh, Nelson Laird, & Umbach, 2004; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003). Author 1's approach to teaching is underpinned by the belief that context gives meaning to learning and that skills and knowledge are most effective when students engage in relevant and meaningful tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Although there are various understandings and interpretations of what "contextualised learning" means to students and those working in higher education,

the foundations of this principle are grounded in the recognising, valuing and embracing of students' backgrounds and contexts (Burton, Lawrence, Dashwood, Brown, & White, 2007). The valuing of the student context, when framed within a strength-based paradigm that acknowledges the richness of learners' life experiences and the multiple perspectives they bring with them to a learning environment, prevents the treatment of students as an undifferentiated, homogenous mass. It is important to celebrate this richness and establish a two-way positive exchange of information. This process also needs to ensure the engagement and collaboration between students and students, students and educators and students and the learning environment as part of this learning journey (Elson-Green, 2007).

The Winning Formula reinforces that – whether a student is local to Toowoomba, from elsewhere in Australia, overseas in Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Brunei, Dubai or Canada – the course being offered will provide students with a range of open-ended materials and processes encouraging them to make connections between the study materials and their own situation as well as share details of their context with others. The most useful course materials are those which ensure relevancy and incorporate sustainable principles that clearly demonstrate links between theory and the real world applications (Lawrence, 2006; Rickford, 2005).

The Winning Formula reflects Author 1's aim to ensure that the content of a course is specific enough to meet the course objectives whilst flexible enough to enable multiple contextual applications. It encourages students to continually ask themselves – “What does this content and theory mean to me and how can I use it in my context?” Examples of this include providing regular forum topics and questions where students are encouraged to share their experiences and contexts with the group. Another example of contextual application is the provision of a range of students' work or exemplars throughout the course materials. This can include (with appropriate permissions) a sample of a past student's forum posting, or part of a student's response to an assessment piece as an exemplar for other students to view. Students also appreciate the inclusion of a reading, interview, video clip, newspaper article or piece of text from a range of cultural and social contexts as well as other real world examples. This acknowledges the complex relationship between globalisation and education as well as considering the cultural, political, sociological and philosophical perspectives of students and educators (Freeman, 1998).

Provision of resources to motivate student engagement

Just as a chameleon changes its colour to suit its environment, so too is it important to ensure resources and information shared in a course are relevant to students' different learning styles, circumstances and contexts. Some students enjoy reading from hard copy materials and study modules; some prefer multi-media and audio presentations; others favour a more 'lecture style' PowerPoint presentation, whilst some benefit from collaborating and critically reflecting on concepts with others. The Winning Formula, based on constructivist principles, emphasises that course materials and content 'come alive' for students, motivating them to construct their own knowledge and become actively involved in the process of meaning making (Hung, 2001). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) suggest that the more time and energy students devote to desired activities, the better the chances are that they will develop habits of the mind that are key to success. It is important that students see the information offered in the course as more than just something that matters for fulfilling assessment requirements but come away with real strategies and tools that can be used in multiple applications.

The challenge for educators is to ensure that the range of materials and resources presented offers students the opportunity to choose and connect with information that resonates with and is relevant to them (a tool box of ideas) whilst ensuring they graduate with sound and current work-based knowledge. An example of this tool-box of ideas is provided in a pre-service course focusing on physical activity for young children. The course incorporates resources that help students make connections with course content by including personally designed videos on infant massage, parachute play, balloon play, relaxation methods and activities to support diversity (just to name a few). Other popular resources are podcasts, radio interviews and episodes of interesting television programs used to highlight a particular issue or share an interesting perspective.

The CHE factor

The design principle of the CHE factor grew out of a study conducted by Author 2 as part of her doctoral research (Reushle, 2005). Over a 2-year period, the author collaborated with two groups of teachers from a polytechnic in Singapore to build the capacity of the groups in designing for online learning and teaching. From the study, the author developed a number of key principles to guide the design of higher education, elearning environments. The principles reflect the view that “good teaching is good teaching” (Ragan, 1998, p. 1) because Author 2 believes that there are enduring premises about good teaching which transcend learning and teaching approaches and contexts. The intention was not to focus on the content of any particular course or program but on a set of guiding principles that could be applied to online environments across educational contexts.

Of relevance to this paper is the principle of the CHE factor with the concepts of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy. The significance of these three qualities to learning and teaching is not exclusive to the elearning environment but they are critical in establishing and maintaining the presence factor in online settings. Familiar, conversational discourse and visual imagery which promote a sense of sharing and belonging can be used and include prompts such as “meet you in the coffee shop”; “talk to you tomorrow”, and “see you in the forums”. Peer-learning partnerships where experienced and inexperienced learners support each other can also be established and encouraged. In Author 2’s research, she found the use of personal email to support, guide, reassure and generally remind learners of the importance of their presence was well received as well as the use of photos and audio welcomes.

As part of the learning process, online educators can assist learners to question assumptions underlying their structures of understanding or to realise alternatives to their ways of thinking and living. This must be done with care and sensitivity. Brookfield (1994, p. 179) notes, “It is no good encouraging people to recognize and analyze their assumptions if their self-esteem is destroyed in the process.” King (2003, pp. 89–90) refers to this stage in the learning process as “building safety and trust” which can be communicated in “word, attitude and environment” and stresses the importance of valuing individual differences, affirming the individual and recognising multiple perspectives and realities. The creation and maintenance of the human touch throughout the online learning experience encourages learners to feel they are members of a safe, supportive, productive learning community.

Twigg (2001, p. 15) notes that human contact is necessary for more than just learning and that “encouragement, praise, and assurance that [learners] are on the

right learning path are also critical feedback components.” Learner feedback gathered during the initial study, and also since then, highlights the importance of these human qualities being present in an online environment. Learners have described the online experience by using words and phrases such as “a sense of connectedness and sharing”, “enabling the construction of new understandings and relationships”, “exhilaration, inspiration, passion”, and the “opportunity for personal reassessment to explore beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, and abilities.” A learner from a post-study activity observed that group interaction is based on concepts such as “mutual respect, safety, a willingness to share a bit of self” and noted that “respectful human relationships are a necessary ingredient.”

It was evident in Author 2’s research that two key factors form the focus of learning in online environments: the people – the human element – and the activities – the actions. This moves the primary emphasis of learning away from what we learn, to whom we learn from, with, and how we learn. The CHE factor is of relevance to online learners, facilitators, and designers. Empathy and understanding (facilitator-learner, learner-learner, and learner-facilitator) are critical emotions that are highly valued by participants in an online learning environment. This position (and the supporting evidence) challenges the perception that human-computer interaction online is an impersonal, individual activity. Given the appropriate online environment, learners and teachers can experience highly affective interpersonal interactions and the boundaries between formal and informal learning often disappear. A student from Author 2’s research observed that “What technology affords us is the opportunity to reach out without the need for touch or eye contact. Perhaps we are challenging the notion that you can see a person's soul in their eyes, and that in fact, the soul transcends the physical to such an extent that you can feel and touch it even through a chat on the computer.”

The power of connection

After several pedagogical discussions and sharing of research outcomes, pedagogical approaches and implications for practice, the two authors identified a distinct synergy between their teaching approaches and individual research. This process gave them the opportunity to outline their epistemological positions to teaching, learning and to the support of their students. The authors also shared a range of student feedback, evaluation data from their courses as well as academic writing they had done previously to articulate their learning and teaching approaches. From these multiple data sources the two researchers were able to investigate and appreciate not only commonalities between their two approaches but also the uniqueness of their own and each others’ approaches. They were also able to generate a rich description and deeper level insights of their own and each other’s work (Stark & Torrance, 2005; Yin, 2003).

The authors recognised that they shared similar epistemological approaches in their work with their respective undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts of learners. Using an approach which resembled that of thematic analysis, the authors created and applied a number of codes or categories to the rich descriptions of their work in order to identify similarities or “sameness” in approach. The codes or categories identified are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Codes or categories created and applied to identify similarities in approaches

Code or category	Definition
connected	Open sharing of ideas creating team spirit, harmony, safety and trust among participants
supported, valued and respected	Focus on affective interaction where the expression of positive emotion and feelings conveys a sense of support, respect and value for all participants
contextual	Acknowledgment of a unique set of conditions or circumstances that operate on or are embedded in the life of an individual, group, a situation, or event that gives meaning to its interpretation
application, meaningful	Learning that is situated through the provision of authentic, meaningful, applied activities, with timely feedback.
pedagogical belief	Explanation of pedagogical approaches and beliefs to the students so that expectations are clearly and explicitly communicated
flexibility	Flexibility of the teachers and learners to adjust and adapt to accommodate diversity and difference
motivating and engaging	Focus on a collegial, learning community where ideas are cultivated, exchanged, tested and evaluated, elaborated upon, and applied

There are issues in undertaking thematic analysis relating to the idea of interpretivism, that is, we are interpretive in our actions and in our understanding of the actions of others. To address this, the authors participated in a process involving a level of epistemological and personal reflexivity where they reflected upon their assumptions about the world and knowledge (epistemological) and upon the ways in which their own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, and social identities have shaped their pedagogical approaches (personal) (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). During this time, the authors participated in critical, co-constructive conversations to share and discuss terms and common phrases of the categories arrived at for coding (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This led to the construction of six key principles or themes identified as being common to both their approaches whilst also acknowledging those practices unique to each educator (Patton, 2002). Through this process, the researchers' own perspectives were appreciated, whilst being informed by each other's points of view.

The six learning and teaching principles that had relevance to both learning contexts were identified:

1. Ensure students feel connected, supported and valued as individuals and as part of a community of learners.
2. Ensure teaching and learning activities have contextual application and relevance so that they are productive, meaningful and engaging.
3. Outline clear expectations, approaches and levels of support to motivate and enhance the student learning journey.
4. Clearly communicate the pedagogical beliefs and approaches of the teacher.
5. Provide resources to suit a range of learning styles and to ensure maximum flexibility.

6. Encourage and motivate students to embrace course content, concepts and the perspectives of others.

Implications for practice

This process of sharing, comparing and co-constructing was important for the authors in developing a heightened awareness and appreciation of each other's pedagogical approaches. The conversations which took place led to a deeper understanding, reinforcement and revisiting of what is valuable to consider for improving the learning journey of the tertiary student in an ever-changing world. From this activity, the shared set of guiding principles emerged.

Conditions have been proposed for ensuring a focus on the human element in learning and teaching, promoting a sense of safety and openness in the learning environment, and the importance for all participants to be trusting, empathetic, caring, authentic, and sincere, with a high degree of integrity. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) mention words such as “closeness”, “warmth”, “affiliation” and “openness” which, they note, are words that all point to affective interaction where the expression of emotion, feelings, and mood are defining characteristics. Ensuring that the environment is democratic, open, rational, and that students have access to all available information is critical (Taylor, 1998). This is supported by King's (2003) work with the professional development of adults where she found that participants consistently revisit what they did (learning activities) and who they worked with (relationships) as the catalysts for learning.

The inclusion of learning activities that emphasise and support a learner-centred approach that promotes student autonomy, participation, and collaboration is important. It is recommended that activities be included that encourage the exploration of alternative personal perspectives, problem-posing and personal self-disclosure that ensures discussion and the working through of emotions and feelings before critical reflection occurs. A focus on dynamic activity rather than static content is recommended by Herrington, Oliver, Herrington, and Sparrow (2000) who note that the primary focus in a learning environment is on the activity that learners undertake, and that activity does not supplement a learning environment; it is the environment. One of Author 2's students commented, “I really loved the last assignment. I think it was really valuable as it was something that we can pull out and implement quickly and easily within the classroom context.”

Whether it is the teaching of international students, undergraduate or postgraduate students – a growing body of industry and academic writing suggests that effective learning and teaching needs to be contextualised to support students learning locally and scattered globally in a range of diverse locations (Han & Singh, 2007). Although contextualised learning and meeting the needs of a diverse student population is often a challenge for tertiary educators in terms of time and perceived value (Reis & Kay, 2007), contextualised learning has a range of advantages for both parties. One of the greatest advantages is that students benefit from dual sources of knowledge that help them move beyond their own values and beliefs and develop more extensive cultural and contextual literacy through exposure to the perspectives of others. From a student's perspective, contextualised learning is valued because it enables them to link the familiar with the unfamiliar (Ladson-Billings, 2001). This is both in terms of being able to access their own prior learning to help make sense of new information, as well as a critical step in helping to transition between real and perceived borders of their learning journey and

environment (Jasman, 2010). These sentiments were reflected in comments shared by students as part of feedback and data collected from Author 2's research:

“Sometimes discussions will occur about issues that relate to my background or experience and this facilitates engagement and understanding.”

“I can relate the theory of my study to my current employment. This helps to cement my learning and give me a greater capacity for understanding what I am learning ... also a greater motivation to learn.”

“The course is relevant to my profession and to the level that I have achieved in my role. I can use what I have been doing in the course today at work.”

It is important that higher education institutions consider ways where authentic listening of voices can be achieved and difference can be celebrated (Bauman, 1995). The greatest challenge for educators is knowing how to tap into students as a potential resource (Elson-Green, 2007) but, by doing this, we not only become more familiar with the contexts of our students but also ensure each student is not merely treated as part of an undifferentiated homogenous mass (Singh & Shrestha, 2008).

Conclusion

Although this paper has attempted to articulate a generic set of principles to connect learners with course materials and with each other, just how generalisable these principles are is not evident. Researchers and practitioners are invited to explore how these principles might be applied to other contexts such as other discipline/content areas and other educational sectors, e.g., compulsory education (school) contexts and with culturally diverse groups of learners. Additionally, the authors encourage educators to engage with their colleagues in pedagogical conversations and explore ways they support students on their learning journeys beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is anticipated that the principles articulated in this paper may provide an impetus for pedagogical conversations among other tertiary educators.

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