

Paradigm shift: From traditional to online education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the philosophical and educational practice shift of two academics new to distance and online education. They identify the reasons for this paradigm shift. Beginning with the traditional teacher-focused model of education, they chronicle their adjustments and adoption of new approaches to adapt to Central Queensland University's more student-focused, distance education system.

Preface

I still remember the excitement of six months ago—I was on my way to a new country to work in an innovative, young university that had fully embraced online technology. What I couldn't have known was how much my first term was going to challenge my 10 years of traditional educational experience and philosophical approach to teaching and learning. Almost immediately I found that I was not alone. The following is a shared accounting of the journey for the co-author of this paper and me.

Introduction

In his address 'The Multi-Media University: The Hope for the 21st Century', Sir John Daniel (1997), Vice-Chancellor of Britain's Open University, questions whether the 'traditional' university model is appropriate for 'lifelong learning'. Lifelong learning or *doctrina perpetua*, the motto of Central Queensland University (CQU), embraces the concept of educational access throughout our lifetime (Cross, 1981). The traditional concept of formal education being restricted to a younger developmental stage and a traditional classroom setting is fading. Now, more than ever, adults are viewing education and training as a means of job promotion and retention (Gelpi, 1979). Educators are thus experiencing a changing 'clientele' that increasingly includes people re-entering the educational sector whilst remaining in, or having cycled through, the workforce (Gelpi, 1979).

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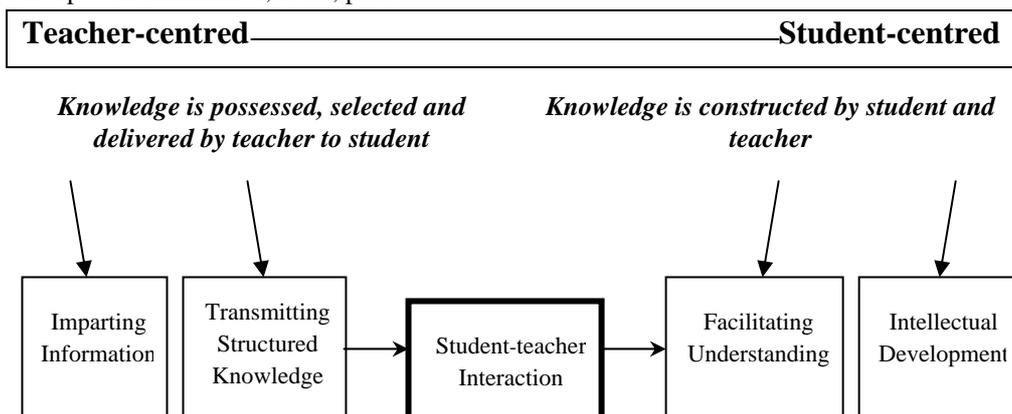
Members of this new clientele can appear to be very different in their educational interests, priorities and requirements for educational delivery. For example, a single mother working full-time may want to increase her salary by becoming the health and safety officer in her workplace. Her ability to obtain the credentials she needs depends on finding an educational institution that delivers the requisite program in a way that means she doesn't have to leave her job or move. From this has come the need for the development of distance education delivery that provides greater flexibility in relation to when and where the learning events occur.

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For the moment let us use the work of Kember (1997) to conceptualise the possible shifts in relationships among teacher, student and resulting learning context (i.e., teaching, content and knowledge). From the findings of studies exploring what university academics think about teaching, Kember (1997) constructed a conceptual continuum, which he labelled teacher-centred versus student-centred. A simplified rendition illustrating extreme polar entities has been presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Continuum of academics' thinking about teaching

Adapted from Kember, 1997, p. 64.



The teacher-centred side of the continuum conceptualises teachers as actively selecting and directly delivering course content to their passive students. At the opposite end of the continuum is the student-centred pole, where students are actively engaged in their discovery of course content and construction of knowledge and where teachers act as facilitators/change agents. Sitting in the middle of these two extremes is the concept that 'teaching' can take on either of the two extremes. For example, the teacher acts as both presenter and tutor and the student assumes an active role in the educational experience.

Early CQU teaching experiences left the authors feeling that they were operating at both extremes of Kember's (1997) continuum at the same time. This was because of the absence of the selection of their own course materials (acquired from past lecturers) and the non-delivery of traditional classroom lectures. The large number of students asking non-academic questions also left the authors feeling like facilitators rather than lecturers or teachers. The four term system and reduced marking support further reduced the time available proactively to post thought-provoking comments, educational events and materials on the online course

management system. Thus, it was left largely up to students to be self-motivated to move through the course materials and to initiate contact with academics. The educational aspects of teaching and learning became secondary to the administration of the courses because of the additional duties brought about by the absence of face-to-face classroom interaction. The authors lamented how easily the repeated renditions of the same administrative questions (usually covered in the student's course profile) came to the email inbox and telephone voicemail. In a traditional classroom setting, these questions would have been addressed in the first classroom encounter. In retrospect, the desire to return to a traditional teacher-centred teaching paradigm was prompted because many students were resistant to, or unable to sign on to, the course's then online learning management system, WebCT. This meant that the web posted responses to administrative questions, as well as the thought-provoking questions and educational comments designed to motivate thinking and to facilitate student interaction, went largely unnoticed.

Compounding these philosophical dilemmas regarding the shift to a student-centred distance education paradigm was the suspicion that many students were failing to work through their reading materials and study guides. This feeling was based on the proportionately low number of students who made contact with academics for course content related enquiries. It was reaffirmed by the gaps in understanding and limited coverage of core concepts that were found after marking assessment pieces.

A related area of concern was the greater responsibility that students now had to access their 'co-academic stakeholders' such as librarians, communications/learning specialists and counsellors. Despite course profiles notifying students of this academic support and notices to this effect on WebCT and assignment feedback, few students accessed these stakeholders. It appeared that students' attitudes were that, if the academics were not directly involved, then the students would disregard the importance of resolving these academic inadequacies. Several students complained that they should not have been marked down for poor spelling and grammar, as this was not considered to be course content, despite a marking matrix clearly indicating its importance. It seemed that students were also grappling with the shift from a teacher- to a student-centred learning paradigm.

The Internet abounds with educators questioning whether students learn as much in the absence of traditional, face-to-face instruction (Willis, 2003). This debate seems never-ending, and many aspects of this were discussed at the Apple University Consortium (AUC) in Adelaide in 2003. The AUC is an annual event where educators and information technology developers meet to discuss challenges and to share solutions. This meeting provided the authors with practical strategies to engage with various issues held dear to educators — commonsense approaches to the 'tweaking' of existing curriculum. For most of the courses taught, this consists of a course profile with administrative and assignment marking guidelines, paper-based text and readings, problem-based workbook and assignments, and online computer-based communication areas and residential schools.

Some lessons learned

AUC lesson #1: Students do only what they get marks for doing

Despite the use of course materials firmly based on providing practical, application-based learning, there are still large gaps in what students are choosing to learn. During residential schools, students were asked about their experiences

working through their coursework. Common responses included difficulty finding the time to study given their busy work and family schedules. This translated to the fact that many students first opened their course material halfway into the term in time to submit their first assignment. The brutally honest informed their lecturer that they had skimmed course materials for highlights in order to produce their assignments—some even attached notes and sent emails apologising for the poor quality of work.

In tribute to this feedback and in the context of AUC's lesson #1, adjustments were made to some of the following term's course materials as a pilot project. The first comes in the form of requiring students to contact their academic staff member using Blackboard (which has replaced WebCT as CQU's online learning management system) during Week Two of the term. This is no idle exercise, but one that requires students to send a short note indicating why they are taking the course and what they hope to achieve/learn. Five per cent of the course grade rests on the completion of this task, thus sending the message that this is not an optional request. There are several things it is hoped to achieve with this change, including acquainting students with Blackboard and encouraging them to start the course on schedule. It is believed that more student-to-student interaction will be seen as all students 'get online' at the same time. If this does not happen, then a shift to a student-tutor system will be considered in the future.

The urge to cut the number of assignments required of busy students has also been resisted. By introducing a series of smaller, biweekly assignments worth 15% of the course total mark, it is hoped to keep students moving through the course. Students are told that these smaller, more concretised assignments are building blocks that lay the foundation for the last, major, practical and applied project worth 50% of the final mark. Thus the message is clear: course material has been carefully selected and all of it is important — selective learning will result in diminished success. For some students in the past, having two major assignments worth 50% of the final mark evoked significant anxiety and approach-avoidance behaviour. During Autumn Term, multiple assignments worth 5–33% of the final mark will be introduced to determine if this decreases educational 'anxiety' and assists students to focus on the learning experience.

AUC lesson #2: Choose your communication medium based on educational needs and economic prudence

Most educators believe in the importance of face-to-face interaction between students and teachers — the authors are no different. Upon arriving at CQU, we spent some time trying to establish the logistics of 'going live' during tutorials using Interactive System-wide Learning (ISL) technology. With the full support of the Head of School, it was soon determined that to conduct the tutorials using ISL would not be prudent. This was because the cost benefit analysis did not measure up. The number and location of students who would commit to attending tutorials equated to a cost of approximately \$300 per student per session. Thus ISL may be out of the question if students are outside the CQU network. People working full-time, sometimes on shift schedules, would necessitate multiple ISL sessions. Instead, the mainly print-based and computer-mediated/managed course curriculum system has been retained. ISL will however be used in the following term with first year on-campus students at the Bundaberg campus.

Meanwhile the CQU Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) portal is under development. This will be a 'one stop' Internet location that provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) related to courses and programs. The FAQ portion of the site will answer questions ranging from when to attend residential

school, to guidance on completing course assignments. It also promotes subject-based stakeholder Internet sites in order to encourage self-directed lifelong learning outside the immediate course content. The OHS portal is continuously updated as necessary and actively promoted to our students and colleagues in course materials, newsletters and emails. It is hoped that this 'one stop' site will enable students to gain immediate answers to their questions, irrespective of the time of day. It is expected that this will be a welcomed convenience to students who plan their study schedules over evening and weekend hours.

In the past, a videotape was produced for distribution with course materials. Whilst the videotape was able to bring a visual focus to some course materials, the resources required to duplicate, distribute and update it were exorbitant. A new initiative is currently under way in the development of a CD-ROM that, with current technology, will enable the accomplishment of more than was possible in the videotape presentation format, for instance by allowing an interface into a student's computer Internet system to navigate her or him to important information sites such as the Queensland Division of Workplace Health and Safety and the Australian Standards sites. It has been found in the past that, despite having received training, many students lack sufficient computer skills to enter a profession where they are required to keep abreast of rapidly changing information and legislation. The CD-ROM reaffirms the importance of other relevant information stakeholders located on the electronic highway. It is also intended that videostreaming technology will be used to present a human face to students in the form of instructors and local industry experts.

Conclusion

We have promoted the idea of a shift in thinking about teaching, from what was viewed as a traditional, teacher-centred focus steeped in our respective experiences before coming to CQU, to a distance education, student-centred paradigm. As more experience is gained at CQU, we expect to adopt practices that move us more into the middle of Kember's (1997) teacher-centred versus student-centred continuum. Revision and integration of course curriculum and delivery components will continue as more experience is gained with CQU's students, content requirements and technical constraints. Thus adaptation to capitalising on the best of both the face-to-face and the distance education worlds will continue as the future of lifelong learning – for ourselves as well as for our students – is fully embraced.

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