A Plea for "E" to Excite, Engage and Enrich the Student Learning Experience

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Many years ago, a lecturer came to the Centre in which I worked to discuss 'putting his course online'. It didn't take too long to discern that this lecturer's conception of an online course was simply for us to take his notes and 'put them on the web'. The lecturer could almost be forgiven for having this poor conception of online learning because there was at the time no Learning Management System (LMS) in the university under discussion, up-skilling academic staff through professional development opportunities was in its early stages and the thinking about how technology could be effectively embedded into learning and teaching was not hugely advanced. In his own way this lecturer was being innovative at the time.

In the 21st century however, uploading lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations into the institutional LMS so that students can access them 24/7 is good but hardly justifies the investment in technology being made by higher education institutions and it does not constitute much of an e-learning experience for our students. However, it is still the case that many academic staff are reluctant to consider the potential of technology to engage students in authentic learning experiences, empowering them to become co-creators of new knowledge.

Taking the issue of the student learning experience as a starting point, the prevailing rhetoric is that we must engage students in the learning process and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. This seems quite reasonable until we interrogate the concept of 'engagement' as applied to university level learning. George Kuh, a highly respected educationalist states that:

The engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different backgrounds or with different views (Kuh, 2009).

On one hand this is an excellent definition. On the other hand it assumes, firstly, that students enter into university already knowing their responsibilities in the learning and teaching contract and secondly, it assumes that the university is a more perfect place than it actually is. We only need to look at data from student surveys to know that the questions relating to receiving timely and meaningful feedback that enables students to achieve higher attainment levels almost always receive a poor score. That students are consistently asking for meaningful feedback on their work

which will enable them to enhance their current attainment levels; this would seem to indicate the need for a higher degree of personalisation of the learning and teaching experience.

A simple literature search will reveal many variations on Kuh's definition of 'engagement' but an interpretation of student engagement that reflects the changing nature of learning and teaching at university level in the 21st century is that put forward by Linda Deneen (2010):

"Student engagement is a rendezvous between learning and the digital tools and techniques that excite students."

This definition leads me to pose the question: what barriers are there to 'engaging' students in the processes of learning in a 'digital age'?

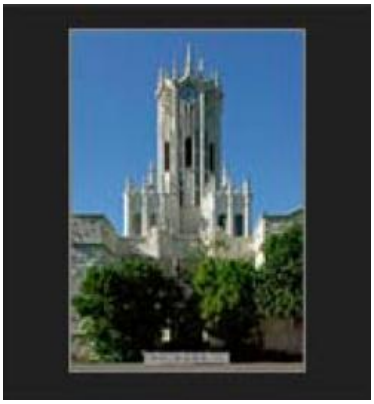
Many of the students entering into university today have grown up with interactive technology. The social networking tools available and their popularity mean that our students are content-creators not just content-consumers. Unfortunately, while we read and hear plenty rhetoric about 'the changing university' (e.g. Barnett, 2000), there appears to be nowhere quite like academia for resisting serious, sustainable change and adapting to changing circumstances. Many of today's learners arrive at university fluent in the use of technologies their teachers have yet to encounter. For the first time in history, 'digital immigrant' teachers need to learn what their 'digital native' students already know in order to engage and teach them effectively (Gunn, 2010). Learners today need to master core subjects, 21st century themes and 21st century skills, but this in turn means that academic and support staff must be proficient in 21st century approaches to facilitating student learning. As Schroeder et al. (2010) have expressed, the expectation that online learning would radically change approaches to teaching and enable colleges and universities to create new revenue streams has not materialised. The issue that universities have in general failed to grasp is that digitization of the face to face delivery mode not only invites a radical shift in our approach to facilitating student learning, it demands a conceptual shift and a rethink of pedagogy, curriculum and instructional design.

It is a challenge to 'engage' students of today if we live in the past ourselves using predominantly what students consider to be outdated modes of teaching. Part of the challenge in developing and providing an e-learning environment and learning experience which is designed to excite and engage students in learning is to address the silo-ed and hierarchical nature of higher education institutions. Too many institutional strategic plans still treat the learning and teaching strategy as a separate entity from e-learning, whereas e-learning should constitute an integral aspect of the overall learning and teaching strategy. There is insufficient communication between different stakeholders in the educational enterprise. Often the institutional culture results in the selection of technologies the technologists favour rather than the business case being made for technology solutions which fit with the institutional culture, vision and mission. This is not a matter of centralized versus decentralized services within an institution, rather the real discussion on IT and digital issues needs to be about demand planning

and service delivery, and where those activities most appropriately belong to achieve maximum benefit at both the institutional and local levels. Instead of feeling complacent about enabling access to lecture notes, outlines and presentations 24/7 we should be thinking big about the "e" in e-learning. "The "e" in e-learning means much more than "electronic" when applied to e-learning — think instead of a big "E" for "exciting, energetic, engaging, extended" learning" (Deneen, 2010).

The starting point for any e-learning capacity building strategy begins from the perspective of the pedagogy. Most staff working in the area of academic development share the fundamental belief that pedagogy should drive learning environments, and not the other way around. Technology should not be used for the sake of technology. We need to engage more with the curriculum for any programme of study and use technological solutions that will improve teaching and learning. It is necessary to bring the scholarship of learning and teaching to the forefront to develop pedagogically sound 'learning objects'.

Within any e-learning team, the role of Learning Designer is critical to putting pedagogy before technology. Learning Designers need to have knowledge and understanding about student approaches to learning, have expertise in instructional design and be engaged in evaluative research into the effectiveness of their practice. For these reasons the position of Learning Designer should be an academic one rather than as it is often conceptualised, as a technical or administrative role. Within my own institution I have successfully made the case for many of the roles associated with building e-learning capability and capacity, including Learning Designers, to be academic positions.



An ongoing issue to be addressed is the skills level of academic staff in embedding e-learning in a meaningful way into their courses and programmes. For some faculty, the idea that they should use technology in teaching in effective ways is seen as an add-on to their workload, but with a generation of digital natives arriving at university with their increasingly sophisticated personal digital tools and mobile devices, this will present major challenges for universities promising to provide an excellent learning experience for their students and different modes of curriculum delivery appropriate to the digital age.

Building e-learning capacity and capability across large, complex, universities is no easy task. There often appears to be a dislocation between investment in the digital infrastructure, including hardware and software and the funding available to support staff in rethinking pedagogy and conceptualising a 'digital curriculum' As is evident from the current budget cuts impacting heavily on academic development centres in the UK and Australia, academic development is not overwhelmingly supported within universities. We can argue that this is precisely the time when academic development should be central to the institutional mission, signalling to stakeholders in the educational enterprise that we are committed to continuous enhancement of the student experience and the continuing professional development of staff to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

In this context, it is a challenge to ensure that all learners acquire the academic literacy skills that will be increasingly required and necessary for ongoing study and the employment market. Academic literacy skills are the key to applying discipline specific knowledge in professional practice contexts. An emergent stream of practice uses e-learning tools and strategies to embed academic literacy skills in course and curriculum design, thus offering unique opportunities to ensure that standards do not fall as enrolment numbers rise (Gunn, 2010) but it will require significantly more investment in learning and teaching enhancement to ensure all staff involved in facilitating student learning do themselves have these skill sets. Universities are being very slow in responding appropriately to the urgent need to rethink their overarching role in society and their contribution to global economic wellbeing and recognising that a holistic response to providing an engaging, 21st century learning journey for all students is required.

We should be asking serious questions about the return on investment in new technologies, but the questions we ask should relate to: the necessity to rethink pedagogy in a digital age, the student learning experience, particularly with respect to engagement and attainment; the proficiency of staff, both academic and academic related in maximising the potential of the technologies available; the challenges and constraints associated with the effective use of technologies in learning, teaching and research. We should also be asking questions about institutional leadership and the extent to which the leadership itself understands the concept, and the potential of e-learning, and the rationale for and objectives of institutional investment in new technologies.

A plea for the 'e' in learning to provide an exciting, engaging and enriching learning experience for students and staff invites us to challenge the status quo, to take hold of the reins and restate the relevance and importance of universities in the 21st century.

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