

Teachers, teaching or tools: what should be the staff development focus in blended learning?

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I recently attended a conference on the future of learning in higher education and in business contexts. There were workshops on a range of learning and teaching approaches including explorations into the roles of curiosity, play, narrative, metaphor and experience. Where was the technology in this learning future? Was it invisible because it was seen as just a tool that was available to be used, or was it seen as inappropriate in the service of learning and teaching?

Currently a strong focus in higher education is how to use different technologies/how to use new teaching tools. This is similar to the situation where an apprentice craftsperson needs to learn how to manipulate tools in order to create a product. How to manipulate tools is not the main focus of the apprentice, however. The apprentice needs to 'be' a craftsperson who looks at materials and tasks in a particular way. The apprentice takes on a craftsperson identity. At the same time s/he learns to identify the purposes and processes of creating, how to develop ideas and to become skilled at the craft. In this approach there become three areas of focus: the identity, the craft and the use of tools.

One could argue that in teaching in higher education we also have three areas of focus: the teacher identity, the teaching process and the tools we use. I would suggest that currently we are focusing particularly on the tools and need to redress the balance by considering who is using these tools and what they are using them for.

To develop an identity as a 'university teacher' requires a way of paying attention to the process of our teaching, to notice and respond to student learning, to enquire into and evaluate what we do, to develop a 'scholarship of learning and teaching' in higher education. Teaching may well be only part of our academic identity but if excellence in learning and teaching is to be a key mission of higher education then we need to pay attention to the development of university teachers. This would involve raising the quality and profile of research into learning and teaching, using resources to enable people to share scholarship in the field and providing opportunities for staff and students together to explore philosophies and practices of learning and teaching. As Skelton (2009:110) argues members of staff need to be able to be part of 'pluralistic, deliberative cultures where not only methods of teaching but also pedagogical theories, values and policies can be shared'.

The teaching, designed to bring about learning, is a key purpose of a university and needs to be a focus of our energy. We need to be analysing what we do in order to identify and generate effective learning experiences. Can we explain to colleagues and students why we teach the way we do on campus and how this relates to how we teach online? As Savin-Baden (2008:82) asks 'What do we mean by pedagogy in online spaces?' Do we know what we want to achieve with our teaching tools, be they flip-charts or wikis?

Have we evidence that what we say and think we do is what really happens in practice? New tools can, of course, open up new teaching possibilities. We need, however, to have a teacher identity and teaching philosophy to recognise this. Staff responses to a student

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blog, for example, are likely to be more informal than written feedback on an assignment. How does this influence the learning? How does this affect the relationship between staff and students and their perceptions on what it means to teach and to learn? How are we reflecting on the integration of new tools into our existing understanding of teaching and what processes are we using for noticing how new tools are influencing this understanding?

Ultimately 'Who am I?' and 'What do I do?' are more important questions to answer than 'What tools do I use to do the job?' It could be argued that some of us are only apprentices in terms of the use of new technological tools, and not in being a teacher and in teaching, and that therefore the focus on learning how to use these tools is valid. However, could we really say that we have taken on teaching identities? How much do we know about how we are teaching compared to what we are teaching? Do we really have cultures in Schools and Faculties in which we articulate and share with colleagues and students ways in which learning will be facilitated and evaluated on modules and programmes?

The move towards more blended and distance learning is inevitable in current contexts of large groups, flexibility and personalisation. How we will move towards it is not. Once established, distance learning courses may be less easy to change in terms of philosophy and approach than campus based courses and therefore paying attention to the roles and identities of teachers and students, the teaching and learning, as well as the tools to be used, is vital. As Kirkwood and Price (2006:13) argue, change involving new technological tools 'necessitates more than simply replicating or supplementing existing teaching practices: everything governing those practices must be reconsidered and reflected upon.' We must ensure that this includes our campus-based teaching. The assumptions underpinning the teaching we undertake on *all* our courses need to be scrutinised

It could be argued that a key role for Schools and Faculties is the generation and use of a range of approaches to disciplinary and cross-disciplinary analysis of teaching values, beliefs and assumptions and ways of evaluating our teaching approaches in relation to their purposes. This will take time, energy and resources. It would seem to be essential if we are to develop effective learning experiences for our students now and in the future. Discussion on whether and how this could be undertaken would be welcome.

References:

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