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When University Presidents Talk About Teaching and Learning

Gary Poole, STLHE President

At the Winter Meeting on Instructional Development, held this February in Vancouver, the presidents of five British Columbia universities formed a panel to discuss the topic "Leadership for Learning." I will not provide a detailed account of that event on this page, though it is my hope that some of the people in attendance will be comparing notes and writing something for our newsletter that does just that. At this time, I would like to reflect on the more general phenomenon of presidents talking about teaching and learning.

Inside this issue...

My first impression is a very straightforward one — presidents know how to discuss this topic. They have the language and they are aware of pressing issues. Panelists spoke knowledgeably about the relationship between teaching and research, about the importance of active learning strategies, the changing demographic of our student populations, and the roles that instructional development offices can and should play in all of this.

I also got the distinct impression that they talk to *each other* about these issues. I would have thought that these conversations focused more directly on numbers than pedagogy, and perhaps this is true. Nevertheless, I think it would be a mistake to just assume that university presidents don't have any understanding of such things as problem-based or inquiry-based learning, the effect of class size on teaching and learning, or the essence of effective online discussion groups.

Of course, there will be considerable variation among presidents in terms of just how conversant they are in these areas. Some of the participants at the Winter Meeting speculated on the extent to which their presidents could "talk the talk." Some expected that their presidents could hold their own in such discussions, others were less optimistic.

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Of course, "talking the talk" is only a small part of the equation when it comes to presidents showing leadership for learning. The panel fielded some frank questions regarding just what they were doing to enhance the learning environments of students on their campuses. Such questions posed to five university presidents invite a good deal of competition, but I was impressed by the way the panelists stayed away from blatant "one-upmanship" in their answers.

Questions regarding "What are presidents doing to support teaching and learning?" grew into "What should we all be doing?" In my view, the conversation became very interesting at this point because we began talking about *change*. I inferred from the presidents' comments that complacency just wasn't going to cut it any more when it came to higher education. We need to develop programs and modes of delivering those programs that are in keeping with the needs of a diverse student population. We need to engender an array of metacognitive skills, provide ample opportunity for good group work, and give students many chances to problem solve and inquire.

For me, the best part of this event was that five university presidents got to spend ninety minutes with about fifty people from across Canada who are very dedicated to teaching and learning. We learned something from the presidents' answers. I also hope that they learned something from our questions.

Classroom Assessment Techniques in Asynchronous Learning Networks

Tom Henderson, Washington State University

As more college and university courses are offered via asynchronous learning networks (ALNs), such institutions face an important question: How can classroom assessment techniques be implemented for distance students, especially students communicating asynchronously?

Cross and Steadman (1996) define classroom assessment as "small-scale assessments conducted continually in college classrooms by discipline-based teachers to determine what students are learning in that class" (p. 8). Classroom assessment provides in-process feedback and allows instructors to implement continuous quality improvement techniques in their class (Soetaert, 1998).

Current research has indicated that classroom assessment techniques (CATs) are highly flexible tools that can be used to achieve many assessment goals:

- Cross and Steadman (1996) list more than 40 types of CATs in their book on classroom research.
- Angelo and Cross (1993) provide CATs designed to assess specific goals as determined by their teaching goals inventory.
- CATs allow feedback to be focused on specific processes, such as Chickering and Gamson's well-known "seven principles" (1987) as articulated by Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001).
- Bonwell (1999) emphasized that effective CATs can be used to implement critical thinking via active learning.
- CATs can be designed and administered to improve students' metacognition skills (Steadman & Svinicki, 1998).

In this article I first describe my attempt to adapt a specific type of classroom assessment technique to a distance learning course at Washington State University (WSU) and then provide a brief overview of CATs with possible issues to consider for future adaptations to online learning.

A Case Study in Adapting CATs to a Distance Course

In the fall semester of 1999, I taught a junior-level introduction to production management via the WSU Distance Degree Program. Twelve distance students were enrolled in this course, which was offered online and used a threaded discussion list called the Speakeasy Studio and Cafe.

The course was designed to promote student-instructor and student-student dialogue. With this in mind, I based a significant portion of the final grade on weekly postings to the threaded discussion list as well as required responses to peers' postings. The original course design emphasized teamwork on all assignments, weekly graded homework, weekly answers to discussion questions, at least three comments on peers' submissions, and three group projects.

During the third week of class, I encountered a significant problem: the threaded discussions were not going well. Answers to discussion questions generated few

comments, and discussion threads were not very long (i.e., they did not generate many responses). In short, there was no extended dialogue among students on a particular problem.

I decided to try a classroom assessment technique similar to a minute paper as described by Angelo and Cross (1993). CATs have been applied online for several years, for example at Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU, 2001), but this was my first attempt. I had the advantage at WSU of having access to an online survey tool to administer the CATs. The online survey program is known as CTLSilhouette at WSU and is used to host "Flashlight Online," the online survey tool for the Flashlight Program of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group. Online surveys are flexible and useful tools for formative assessments such as CATs, especially for distance students studying via an ALN. They have many of the advantages of ALNs in that they are asynchronous, can be authored or taken from any computer with an Internet connection, can be anonymous, and can be adapted to proven formative assessment techniques such as CATs. Students were asked to complete the CAT (or short online survey) by a specific date.

The CAT that I used consisted of two questions:

1. What is the one thing that helped you learn the most in this week's activities?
2. What is the one thing in this course that is least helpful to your learning?

I had received negative feedback on the group work that I had required for the threaded discussion list. I had wrongly assumed that students were concerned about either (a) the amount of time spent coordinating group work or (b) the fact that students in other groups might see their work and steal their ideas (the Speakeasy Studio and Cafe did not allow students to create threaded discussions that only members of their group could see). The short survey revealed that my assumptions were wrong: The students' biggest concern was that other class members could see their work on the threaded discussion list before they were ready for it to be seen.

I decided to change the format of the course based on the results of the CAT. Instead of requiring that all work be done in groups, only three projects would require group work; the remainder of the coursework could be completed independently. Students were still required to post answers to weekly questions and comment on three peer postings weekly on the threaded discussion list, but they were not required to do this as a group.

Three days after the CAT was given, I posted a summary of the students' responses to the online learning environment, along with explanations of changes being made as a result of student input, including changes to the group work requirement. I also explained which student suggestions could not be implemented. This worked well. In the first two weeks of the course, before the CAT was given, students made an average of 16 postings to the threaded discussion list in response to the discussion question. The week after the changes were made, the number of postings jumped to more than 70. Many of the discussion threads were also "deeper" (i.e., an original posting generated several responses, others responded to these responses, and so on), indicating that discussions were becoming more substantive. Increases in discussion volume and commentary may be attributable to the Hawthorne Effect or to the fact that students became more accustomed to the technology and perhaps more interested in the new subject material. At the very least, the CAT helped me recognize my misperceptions and moved the focus of the course from the instructor (teaching-centered) to the students (learning-centered). This is one of the most important effects of classroom assessment techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Issues to Consider in Adapting CATs to Asynchronous Learning Networks

CATs in asynchronous learning networks can be notably different from face-to-face, in-class CATs; these differences may affect student responses to CATs and should be considered in their use. The following points are particularly relevant:

Students in ALNs may be at different stages in a course. Most face-to-face CATs are given during a specific class period. All students have participated in the same class activities, and CATs usually focus on those activities. Students in ALNs, however, may be at various stages: Some may have finished the same unit that others have just started. If an instructor wants feedback on a specific topic, the CAT should be worded accordingly.

Students in ALNs do not experience the same learning environment. Students taking a CAT in a face-to-face course are all in the same physical environment. The instructor does not know what kind of environment ALN students are experiencing when they complete a CAT. Students may be on the road, trying to connect via a hotel telephone; in a quiet office; or at home, trying to deal with a busy household.

Generating anonymous responses in ALNs may be difficult. Examples abound of distance education instructors adapting assessment techniques similar to CATs. Some traditional correspondence courses send students pre-addressed and stamped envelopes and encourage them to mail in their feedback whenever they want. Many online

courses solicit student feedback via e-mail. In both of the above cases, instructors can determine the name of the student sending the comments, and the students know this when they make their responses. To avoid this, some instructors have the mail or e-mail sent to third parties, who remove identification from the correspondence and then forward it to the instructor. The WSU case study had the advantage of access to an online survey tool that could keep responses anonymous.

At the same time, considering some of the key success factors of traditional, face-to-face CATs remains important when considering their application in an online environment. Like face-to-face CATs, those in ALNs need to be well planned, ask pertinent questions, and return results to students quickly. With this in mind, instructors should also consider the nine-step "project cycle" for effective CATs mapped out by Angelo and Cross (1993, p. 34). The steps of the cycle are divided into three phases: planning, implementing, and responding. In another article, Angelo concludes, "After fifteen years of working with faculty, we've learned that it is wise to start small, to limit risk-taking and time invested initially, and to share ideas and outcomes with colleagues" (Angelo, 2000, p. 2).

Conclusion

As an adaptable tool for online course assessment, CATs are too effective not to be used. One of our goals at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at Washington State University is to make the use of CATs in online classes easier by limiting the time investment and risk and to encourage instructors to use them. We hope to foster a learning community in which instructors share their ideas and continuously improve their classes by applying classroom assessment techniques.

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Tom Henderson is the assessment coordinator for the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at Washington State University. His work interests include formative assessment techniques, efficiency of new educational technologies, and the study of how the processes of designing, developing, delivering, and assessing online courses interact with the effectiveness of the course's teaching and learning.

Six Strategies for Helping the Adult Distance Learner Succeed

Ellen Rose
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Distance education can be an ideal mode of instructional delivery for adult learners. Not only does remote delivery enable adults to gain education without disrupting their busy home and work lives, but the kinds of instructional experiences which succeed in distance delivery tend to accord well with the adult's need for instruction which is personally relevant. As Nunan (1993) observes, both distance education and adult education share a "focus upon designing and employing interactions which employ personal experience, are self-directed, located in a context which employs 'real life', and appeal to intrinsic, rather than extrinsic motivations" (pp. 198-99).

However, despite the apparent fit between adult learning principles and distance education practices, not all adult learners succeed in distance learning experiences. In fact, high attrition rates remain a problem. The purpose of this article is to suggest six strategies which instructors can use to help adults succeed as distance learners.

First, instructors should vary their approaches to new material in order to accommodate students' varied learning styles. For example, some lessons might begin with a hands-on activity to engage those whom Kolb's Learning Style Inventory identifies as "accommodators," some with a brainstorming session for "divergers," some with a reading for "assimilators," and some with a problem-solving exercise for "convergers." Offering multiple modes of communication (audio, video, text) is another means of accommodating different learning styles which may also help people feel more in touch with the instructor and each other.

Research suggests that attrition rates have as much to do with feelings of confidence, competence, and commitment as with learning styles (Tobin, 1995, p. 203). Therefore, a second strategy instructors can use is to provide learners with many opportunities to achieve a positive sense of accomplishment. Providing prompt feedback will also enable learners to develop self-confidence and a desire to continue learning.

Third, the distance course should not be designed and delivered as simply a remote version of the original course. "Good practice is not a universal, transferable commodity. What may work in one context may be dysfunctional in another" (Pacey & Penney, 1995, p. 30). Distance education generally requires significant course redesign, and may even lead the instructor to rethink the process of learning and education. Traditional educational methods tend to be based upon a view of the learner as a product to be shaped according to predefined learning objectives. But to truly foster distance learning, instructors must begin to think of the student as a individual who engages with and makes personal sense of the content. The goal in distance education is to "enable the learners and learning rather than to cover content and process students" (Pacey & Penney, 1995, p. 34).

Fourth, instructors must be sensitive to cultural differences. Distance learners are an even more heterogeneous group than students in a traditional classroom because physical location is not a determinant of participation in the class. In fact, Haughey (1995) suggests that instructors should be wary of thinking of distance learners as "a class," since this may lead to instructional strategies which ignore individual places and cultural differences (p. 10).

Fifth, instructors can enhance the distance learning experience by being sensitive to the personal contexts of distance learning: the family, the home, the workplace, and the community. According to Burge and Roberts (1998), "learning is an integrated, holistic process involving all the dimensions of being human and living in today's world," and it is therefore necessary for the instructor to be aware of all the factors in a learner's private life which "can have profound effects on learning, not all of which are positive" (pp. 6-7).

Finally, instructors should emphasize from the beginning the hard work and commitment each student will need in order to succeed. As Brindley (1995) notes, the hype about distance education tends to promote features such as flexibility, accessibility, and learner independence, while downplaying "the harsher realities." Thus, many students enter distance education programs with the misconception that it is an easy way to get credentials, and are shocked by the self-discipline and commitment required for study at a distance (p. 111). Instructors should therefore ensure that students don't have false expectations about the course, and should be clear on the new responsibilities which the distance learner must assume in order to ensure the success of the experience.

Once viewed as a "second-best" means of providing instruction for learners unable to attend classes in the normally scheduled time and/or place, distance education is increasingly seen as a means of course delivery which can offer benefits unavailable in more traditional modes of instruction. These benefits may have much to do with the fit between adult learning and distance education practices, but they can only be realized if the learner is the focus of the instructional transaction. The six strategies discussed above will help instructors ensure that distance

education methods are used in ways which are appropriate to the needs and abilities of adult students, and thus help them achieve success as distance learners.

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Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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