

## The Deep End

---

### One Course, One Way? No Way Gary Poole, Former STLHE President

I recently attended a conference on learning technologies at which it was predicted that we would soon be having superior teachers designing courses that all other mere mortals would then “deliver.” The reasoning for this is compelling. Why not have our best course designers do the designing? Technology allows us to “roll out” these courses so that they can be quickly available worldwide. Isn’t this just a matter of taking advantage of strength?

Well, no, I don’t think it is. I think it is much more than that (or less, if you will). One of my colleagues at UBC speaks rather passionately about her dislike of the word “deliver” as it applies to education. I must admit that, at first, I didn’t understand her disdain. But in this context, I get it. Teaching is no more about delivering than learning is about receiving.

Learners, I hope, work with the material that a course offers. If they passively “receive” it, then we have failed to provide higher education, since the process will be void of the thinking skills that many of us hope to encourage. Also, the material will either fade from accessible memory or be distorted unwittingly.

Similarly, teachers work with material. I have never left a teaching workshop with the resolve to implement a new idea verbatim. It must be customized according to who I am as a teacher and how I construe the learning process. I don’t think I am alone in this. Do I always make the idea better? Most probably not. But I always make it *mine*, and that matters enormously. I’m not sure how this could be tested empirically, but I would hypothesize that classrooms, real or virtual, are better places to learn when everyone feels invested in them. For the teacher, this means caring about students’ learning and feeling that he or she is making a contribution to this learning. I would quickly lose interest if my job was to implement a course the way one with no experience must follow a baking recipe.

I can’t imagine how those of us working in the field of instructional development would continue to generate enthusiasm for teaching amongst colleagues who had become “deliverers.” To be fair, there would probably be those colleagues who would welcome the opportunity to stop planning courses and classes. This would free up more time for their research. When students came by to discuss the course, the faculty member might say, “Actually, you should e-mail the creator of this course. She’s better acquainted with the course than I am.”

Proponents of the expert-designed course may pose the following question: Would you rather take a mediocre course from the person who designed it, or an excellent course from someone who has the job of facilitating it? Oh dear, I think, I am about to opt for mediocrity.

But maybe I am guilty of catastrophizing. Maybe there will never come a time when we are asked to teach *the* course in Introductory Biology as opposed to *a* course in Introductory Biology. Perhaps, the expert-designed courses will operate the way textbooks do today. We adopt them and then adapt them, assigning chapters and sections as we see fit, providing commentary and opportunities for discussion in class. Maybe these courses would be accepted as learning objects at a very coarse level of “granularity.”

This I could live with. However, this was not the tenor of the discussion at the aforementioned learning conference. When viewed from a particular administrative perspective, the expert-designed course is of most value when it saves money and is attractively marketable. To achieve this purpose, we can’t be diddling with them at the “delivery” end. In fact, it is entirely conceivable that designers of such courses would want a guarantee that there would be no such diddling or they wouldn’t put their names on them, the way Jack Nicklaus won’t let anyone alter one of his golf courses without his supervision.

I am not saying that we should turn our backs on excellent teaching and learning resources. What I am saying is, "Give us these resources, and let us teach and learn with them." Resources are very different from recipes. I don't think I am violating the teachings of Kahlil Gibran when I assert that courses are taught *by* us, not *through* us.