Faculty Perceptions: Learning Outcomes Equivalencies Comparing Online to In-Person Classes

Frank Bruni, in his February 11, 2015, Op-Ed article in the New York Times (Bruni, 2015), identifies the most transformative educational experience he ever had. It came in college. It was a liberal arts education experience — Shakespeare, to be exact; the Shakespearian tragedies, to be even more exact.

Why did Bruni name that classroom experience? Why did he remember the instructor who triggered that experience? And perhaps the most important question: Why does he count that experience priceless as an example of the value of his education in spite of the fact that the course content within which the experience occurred was neither content in his “major” nor explicitly connected to “getting a job”?

Frank Bruni’s perspective about being human expanded in a class where a college instructor created a transformative moment around the poignancy and tragedy of inherently human traits.

That instructor, Dr. Anne Hall, eventually moved to the University of Pennsylvania where, in 2008, she received the Provost’s Award for Teaching Excellence by Non-Standing and Affiliated Faculty. She obviously continued at UPenn the same quality teaching that created a transformative moment for Frank Bruni.

In her current faculty page in UPenn’s Department of English, Dr. Hall says, “My goal as a teacher of literature treated philosophically is to discover the fundamental difficulties in the human condition that the author is wrestling with” (Hall, n.d.).

“Fundamental Difficulties in the Human Condition, 101” is not a requirement in college curricula of which I am aware. You can get a job, I’m sure, with the most prestigious energy company or architectural firm or grocery store chain or software design operation in the world without such a course showing on your academic transcript. And the question, “How do you tackle fundamental difficulties in the human condition?” is probably not one most job seekers anticipate will be part of their job interviews.

(Perhaps the single instance in this regard concerning interview preparation is among beauty pageant contestants.)

Why, then, is what Dr. Anne Hall does, along with all college faculty who seek to create assignments and environments that prompt Transformative Learning, priceless? Bruni goes on to address this in his piece, raising the specter that some in our society think there is little value in transformative education because
it doesn’t fit easily into a calculus or algorithm focused on “getting a job.”

UCO’s definition of TL charges us to help students learn by developing beyond-disciplinary skills and expanding their perspectives of their relationships to self, others, community, and environment. So for us, knowing why a transformative education is priceless is important. It is important because it informs how we help students learn, which is our mission.

But it is also important because, in addition to educating our students, we must accept a responsibility to educate legislators, community organizations, parents, employers, and others about the value of an education that produces more than the sum of the parts comprised of chunks of knowledge explicitly related to a desired vocation.

A transformative education is about wisdom.

True, we want students to possess the knowledge and skills they develop in their disciplines. Perhaps more important, though, is the wisdom to know when to hold one’s tongue and when to speak out, the emotional intelligence to connect with others different from you, the insights to solve ill-formed problems, and the acceptance of personal responsibility to leave one’s community better for having been there.

In total, those things do not comprise a formal curriculum. But they must be infused in any successful college education, and we must be ready with lucid, compelling arguments for exactly why this is the case.

One reason explanations of Transformative Learning’s pricelessness are needed lies in Bruni’s description of wrongheaded tinkering with university mission statements by politicians seemingly intent on forcing public institutions to offer only courses that clearly lead to getting a job. We say an important value-add of TL is precisely because it provides beyond-disciplinary knowledge and skills not purely technical or vocational in nature.

We know this is true. Bruni writes persuasively about his personal truth in this regard. What is your personal argument that the University of Central Oklahoma does provide more than a vocational-technical education?

Are you prepared to make this argument not just to friends, family, legislators, but to students as well? Click here to read Dan Berrett’s recent Chronicle article (January 26, 2015) which includes an interactive graph built on data from UCLA’s annual Higher Education Research Institute freshman survey. The graph allows you to toggle between students’ responses about the degree to which the objective of college is to be “very well off financially” and/or to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life.”
We must continue working to build assignments, activities, and environments that prompt and support expansion of perspective and beyond-disciplinary skills. We must also be persuasive proponents that not being intentional in doing this is to doom our graduates and our society to valuing more highly skills that may someday be taken over by machines at the expense of valuing skills like innovation, teamwork, problem-solving, and empathy.

Those are the skills that create the vision for the machines in the first place.

References


Hall, A. (n.d.) Faculty page, Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved February 15, 2015, from https://www.english.upenn.edu/People/AnneHall
GREAT TEACHING

A Pedagogical Shift in the Capstone Course for the Masters of Substance Abuse Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

By J. Keith Killian, D.O., LADC-MH

(Editor’s Note: As you’ll read below, Dr. K masterfully created a learning environment likely to prompt Transformative Learning within the capstone class in UCO’s Master’s in Substance Abuse Studies. In addition to the preparation students engage in as part of learning content, the transformative realization about themselves as learners, and importantly, as near-future peers within a discipline, now occurs as a result of the implementation of the great teaching idea described below. JK)

Over the course of a year, a plan was developed to open up and enrich both of these closed conversations by creating a conference for graduate-level capstone students in Substance Abuse Studies from throughout Oklahoma. This graduate student conference was scheduled concurrently with the state professional conference, so that participants in each conference would be able to attend and receive continuing education units for sessions at both conferences.

It required a leap of faith — and fear — for students to leave the safe and familiar environment of the classroom in order to present their research to a professional audience of people who have counseling licenses, many with multiple master’s degrees and years of practical experience in the field. Doing so, however, allowed the students to engage with a wider professional community, to begin new discourses, and to energize the wider professional community with their ideas and research. Reversing roles, the students became teachers to the community of professionals that they were preparing to join.

The students were given wide latitude in identifying topics on which to present. They were encouraged to choose topics that they would enjoy researching and to use this opportunity to introduce themselves to the field in a manner that would show their creativity, their professional competence, and their approaches to substance abuse counseling. The students were reminded, too, that the audience they would be addressing would include prospective employers as well as future professional colleagues.

Following these conference presentations, clinical directors and executive directors from multiple agencies expressed interest in hearing from the students upon their graduation. Students who had been terrified of venturing out of their comfort zone reported that the experience of presenting in this
professional environment was extremely rewarding and gave their work a sense of meaning and purpose. Many stated that it was the most difficult but also the most worthwhile assignment they completed in the graduate program. The responses they received from the audience helped them to see their work not merely as “good enough” but as relevant, important, and on point, and they learned that professionals in the field are eager to hear and learn from what they have to say. Students stated that their capstone projects were no longer just papers that they had to produce in order to graduate but rather a means of establishing themselves in the field that they have been preparing for years to enter.

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READINGS OF INTEREST

Testing: It’s Not a Dipstick, It’s Retrieval Practice (Part 1)

Whether article length (“Forget What You Know About Good Study Habits,” New York Times, September 6, 2010) or book length (Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning, 2014: Why Don’t Students Like School?, 2009), cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and other researchers are finding that some commonly held ideas about good studying and good teaching simply aren’t true.

And lest you worry that such research shows that some kinds of teaching styles (speaking here of personality traits like extroversion and introversion) are better at producing learning than others, proof of correlation, to say nothing of causality, isn’t out there: “We have yet to identify the common threads between teachers who create a constructive learning atmosphere” (Willingham, as quoted in Carey, 2010).

Of extreme interest to college faculty is the finding that most students simply don’t know how to study: “students’ awareness of the effectiveness of several such [learning/studying] strategies is low or non-existent” (McCabe, 2011, p. 474).

We can help them learn how, according to this same research.

The first step may be to help students unlearn the strategies they’re using now if those strategies are the oft-quoted, “common sense” strategies they’ve probably heard repeatedly. Surveys of student study habits confirm that the most frequently used are “highlighting, underlining, and sustained poring over notes and texts” (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 15).

The problem is, in the absence of knowing any other way to study, students will then be left with no strategies at all. This is where we have the opportunity to help students replace demonstrably ineffective study habits with techniques proven to work.

With numerous research studies, scores of journal articles, and entire books devoted to the ways of studying and learning that are proven to be effective, a brief article is woefully insufficient to provide the wealth of information about how to help students study and learn better. We’ll settle on one (surprisingly easy) technique in this discussion and address others in future articles.

Try this survey in your next class. Ask how many students test themselves on the information they’ve read in the text or in any learning material. “Not our job — you’re the teacher,” may be one response. “Testing? Yuck! I hate taking
tests. Why would I put myself through that on purpose if I don’t have to?”

The research incontrovertibly shows, however, that testing for recall is a powerful learning strategy:

One of the most striking research findings is the power of active retrieval — testing — to strengthen memory, and that the more effortful the retrieval, the stronger the benefit. . . . The act of retrieving learning from memory has two profound benefits. One, it tells you what you know and don’t know, and therefore where you need to focus further study to improve the areas where you’re weak. Two, recalling what you have learned causes your brain to reconsolidate the memory, which strengthens its connections to what you already know and makes it easier for you to recall in the future. (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, pp. 19-20)

Another reason this is a powerful learning strategy is that putting into your own words the concept under study gets you out of the illusion of mastery based on familiarity with something written (textbook) or something spoken (lecture). Students often use the “read, re-read, then re-read again” approach in studying because it gives them the emotional lift of confidence — they’re confident they understand the material because they’re read the words (or heard them) so many times that those words are familiar. If they’re familiar, that must mean they know material, right?

Dead wrong, yet this is the strategy students believe works, and it’s also the strategy commonly given as advice on how to study: read more than once, focus on what you’re reading, and so on.

A far more effective strategy for understanding what you’ve read, for instance, is to read it then try to put into your own words what the author is explaining.

In the case of students, one excellent mechanism for doing this is a study group: you ask your peers to listen to your explanation and see if it conveys the understanding they got from the author’s explanation.

When studying alone, a spoken description of the idea just described in the text can be captured on a computer’s recorder (or a smartphone’s recorder, or an MP3 player’s recorder, or _____) and played back for the student to determine whether the explanation makes sense.

Usually, just the process of trying to describe in one’s own words the concept(s) under study is enough to disabuse students of the idea they really understand the material when they don’t.

Yet very few students use this simple, powerful, easy, time-saving technique.
Instead, the dreaded “all-nighter” to cram for a big test is what students expect they’ll have to do. This can lead to the use of uppers, Adderall, etc., as aids to focus or even just stay awake during the cram session. Then there’s the disappointment of a lower test grade than what the student wanted. And the irony in all of it is there’s an easier way that avoids the stress; results in better, deeper learning; and helps students manage their time better in the bargain.

In class, the way to do this is via peer instruction. Students teach each other in groups after exposure to information. The teaching is after they’ve been “tested” in formative fashion (meaning, testing during the process of learning in order to help the learning, with immediate correction available for wrong answers), and the group work allows students to put into their own words the reasons why, say, “B” is the correct choice on the test instead of “C.”

(Many readers will recognize this process as what Eric Mazur of Harvard does with his version of peer instruction and use of clickers in the classroom along with group work. See Mazur, 1997, and this video.)

The simple act of testing yourself before you go to class pays enormous benefits, yet most students don’t do it, and many have never even heard of the technique. They think of testing as some kind of school-specific thing that’s designed as a hoop through which they jump and which is a dipstick-like measure the teacher uses to rate their goodness as students.

They certainly don’t think of it as a study technique, yet it’s one of the simplest, most effective strategies they can possibly employ.

(Coming in Part II: How to test your students frequently AND have them give you higher end-of-term student survey ratings.)
References


eLEARNING

Enhancing Understanding of Designed Learning Experiences

Bucky J. Dodd, Ph.D.

Key Points:
● Barriers to understanding how learning experiences (courses, training programs, etc.) are designed
● Understanding assumptions for designing learning experiences
● Strategies for gaining insights and understandings into the way learning experiences are designed

Setting the Stage

Think about the last time you had to make a decision about the way a course was designed or the way you taught a course. What prompted you to have a need to make this decision? In more cases than not, the need to re-design something is based on a problem that was experienced. In course design and teaching, this is often based on poor student performance on an assessment, increased questions about an assignment, or general confusion on a course topic. In this example, you would have originally designed the course or the teaching experience with a set of assumptions about how the students would learn most effectively; however, when applied to real context, there may have been a need to revise the plan.

In the previous scenario, what could have been done to avoid the need for re-design? What assumptions were applied to the original design that turned out not to be true? These questions frame why understanding how learning experiences are designed is so important, yet in reality gaining new understandings and insights remains an important challenge for those who design courses and teach. This article explores techniques for gaining new insights and perspectives into how learning experiences are designed so you can make more effective and intentional decisions about these learning experiences.

Barriers to Understanding Learning Experiences

In many ways, the design of learning experiences such as courses or training programs is an art. This article uses the term learning designer to describe anyone who makes decisions about course design or teaching experiences. This might be a faculty member, teacher, instructional designer, or program coordinator. There is often a delicate balance between applying the science of how people learn and the intuition of the designer to create an experience that amplifies and catalyzes the learning process. Many course designers operate from a mental understanding, or model, of how the experience is constructed.
Technology, research about human learning processes, and growing regulatory and policy considerations all create an environment where designers can no longer consider all the relevant influences of a given learning experience without the help of certain design tools. While iterations of these design tools exist (i.e., written course design plan, objective matrix, syllabus), they are rarely used to the fullest potential to gain new insights into how learning experiences are designed and the expected results. The environment in which learning is being designed is often so complex, learning designers need more effective methods to manage and simplify this complexity so the best and most strategic decisions can be made (McDonald, 2008).

Why are we not doing this now? In most part, the tools available for “modeling” learning experiences remain time consuming and unfamiliar to many learning designers. Time constraints, lack of perceived importance (i.e., if it’s not broken, why fix it), and overall design processes that haven’t adapted to the modern context of course design and teaching are three of the major reasons why there continues to be a lack of insight into how learning experiences are designed. In addition, learning designers lack approaches and tools for developing models of learning experiences. Without a good understanding of how a learning experience is designed, it remains challenging to innovate and improve the design of the experience for learners.

Assumptions That Influence Learning Experiences

When learning experiences, such as courses, are designed they often carry a set of assumptions with them about how the designer perceives the learning process. For example, if the designer’s assumption is that learning happens best when the instructor presents a lecture and learners process that information, then most likely learning experiences designed by that person will reflect that assumption. In contrast, if the learning designer does not devote time to planning, content development, and developing learning objectives, the learning experience will reflect a much different experience for the instructor and students.

Designed learning experiences involve the balancing of several key perspectives about learning processes. These assumptions include:

- What the designer intends for the learning experience
- What the environment is designed for
- What the learner expects to experience
- What the learner actually experiences
- What the learner perceives
- What the instructor expects to experience
- What the instructor actually experiences
- What the instructor perceives
● What the designer perceives

This list reflects several assumptions that frame the design and delivery of learning experiences. In some situations, the designer may acknowledge perspectives and make decisions based on that information. In other situations, a learning designer may not be aware of how these assumptions shape the design decisions that are used to create a course or training program. Learning designers need more effective ways of understanding the learning experiences they create and facilitate. This means extending beyond deeply held assumptions about how learning happens and challenging new and innovative approaches to designing learning experiences.

Strategies for Creating Better Understanding of the Learning Experiences We Design

How can learning designers develop a more effective understanding of the learning experiences they design? The first goal of improving learning experiences is to develop a more informed and complete understanding of the holistic learning experience, assumptions, and designed components that influence the experience. Hokanson (2008) described the goals of modeling learning experiences as enhancing understanding, comparisons, annotations, facilitating changes, remembering, and sharing. There are several easy-to-use techniques that can assist with these goals through creating a more complete and detailed understanding of the learning experiences we design.

● Simplify complexity using design patterns — Design patterns are strategies that can be applied and replicated across multiple situations that address a specific set of problems. For example, providing a detailed introduction to a lesson can be used to orient learners to the topic and activities that are to come. This same strategy can be used across multiple lessons with different types of content. Design patterns establish a concise and practical way to approach design situations while outlining clearly anticipated outcomes from the approach. You can read more about design patterns by reading Designing with Patterns in Mind.

● Sketch the experiences as a system — One of the more effective methods for developing an advanced understanding of learning experiences is to create drawings and sketches. The value in sketching how a learning experience is designed is not necessarily in the drawing itself, but the process of creating and synthesizing the many factors that go into designing courses, training, or informal learning resources. When a drawing or sketch is created, it also establishes a sharable asset that encapsulates a modeled understanding of what the learning experience
is and what it should accomplish. This process also guides the designer through thinking in systems by identifying the components involved in a learning experience and how those elements are related to one another. Sketches can be created with paper and pencil or using sophisticated imaging software. You can learn more about sketching learning experiences by reading Visual Tools for Designing eLearning.

- Seek opportunities to share the design approach with others — After identifying design patterns and sketching learning experiences, it is beneficial to find other experts in your field with whom to share your design approach. This may be as simple as meeting for coffee to discuss the approach you are taking with a course and get feedback, or finding communities of practice in which you can share your ideas. When meeting and sharing ideas with others, the design patterns, graphical sketches, and drawings will assist in the explanation of the ideas and provide a platform for adding notes and suggestions you receive from the collaboration experience.

Concluding Thoughts

It can be a daunting process to design a course or training program. Two of the major challenges in this process are fully understanding all the elements that go into planning a learning experience and how designers can influence those elements to improve the quality of the experience. At the core of effective design is a clear understanding of the experience that is being designed for. This article discussed barriers, assumptions, and strategies that shape the design of learning experiences.

References

