Chapter 4
Giving Teaching Advice Meaning:
The Importance of Contextualizing Pedagogical Instruction within the Discipline

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ABSTRACT

Moving a course to a blended, online, or distance environment prompts some level of course evaluation and re-design. Having an understanding of the teaching process, both within and across the disciplines, can have a profound effect in developing a cohesive academic program. With an understanding of pedagogy, an effective course developer can implement positive pedagogical change without undermining a discipline's integrity. The course developer needs to have an awareness not only of how, but of what and why knowledge is taught within a discipline. An in-depth understanding of a subject cannot be achieved by a few generalized sessions with an academic. In a face-to-face setting, poor course design can often be compensated for by an astute academic where physical cues can be received directly from the students and delivery can be immediately adjusted accordingly. In online or distance learning, however, it can be harder to gauge student concern, so poor course design can have a devastating effect on student learning. This chapter highlights the importance of contextualising pedagogical instruction within a discipline when undertaking course evaluation and/or redesign.

INTRODUCTION

Moving a course to a blended, online or distance environment prompts some level of course evaluation and re-design. Many universities establish centralised teaching and learning departments that employ course developers who specialise in online and distance learning to facilitate this process. This chapter highlights the need for centralised staff to have specific discipline knowledge so that they might understand how learning can most effectively take place within a discipline. It is valuable to recognise how disciplinary communities perceive the nature of knowledge, research and teaching, the forms of pedagogy and curricula commonly employed, student interests and the impact professional organizations have on the content and practices of a discipline (Jenkins, Healey & Zetter, 2007).

Having an understanding of the teaching processes, both within and *across* the disciplines can have a profound effect in developing a cohesive academic program. With this understanding, an effective course developer can implement positive pedagogical change without undermining a discipline's integrity. Similarly, academics in the disciplines need to be aware that good teaching in a well-designed course has the potential to accrue benefits for themselves, their students and their university. Mere subject knowledge is as ineffectual as a lack of context in the pedagogical knowledge of the course developer. There is a need for these two groups' understandings to move more closely together so they can produce courses that demonstrate sound pedagogical content knowledge.

A generic focus of educational development contrasts with the discipline-based identities of most academics in higher education and the integral relationship between teaching practices, subject and content. In recent years there has been a shift from generic educational development to discipline-based approaches which place educational development within the specific and contextualised needs of subject disciplines (Young, 2010).

Pedagogical content knowledge involves having an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult, the conceptions and preconceptions that students bring with them to the learning of those topics (Shulman, 1986). It goes beyond knowledge of subject matter to the dimension of subject pedagogical knowledge for teaching.

Grossman (1990) describes four specific aspects of pedagogical content knowledge: conceptions of the purposes for teaching given subject matter; knowledge of the instructional strategies useful for teaching given content; knowledge of students' understandings and knowledge of the curriculum. Universities that promote course development that focuses on these aspects ensure close attention is paid to course organization, preparation, instructional skill and clarity of delivery. They are likely to reap the benefits of decreased student attrition and greater student learning (Braxton, 2000).

Ratings of student satisfaction with their teaching in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have consistently shown that some disciplines rate much better than others: the teaching experienced in the humanities and social Sciences is more highly regarded than that in the sciences (Scott, 2006; Neumann, Parry & Becher, 2002; Franklin & Theall, 1995; Cashin & Downey, 1995). Braxton (1995) argues that academics in the humanities and social sciences show more interest in their students, student development issues and general undergraduate education than do academics in the sciences. Given the discipline-specific context in which university academics work, it is crucial that course developers investigate discipline-specific knowledge of teaching (Becher, 1994; Braxton, 1995). How a discipline is taught is linked inextricably to the way knowledge is generated within the discipline and to how the discipline functions (Gibbs, 2000). Disciplinary differences can be analysed to help

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