

Chapter 34

Placing Technology in Learner-Centered Design Through Blended Learning in Post-Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

Two university education courses were converted from face-to-face delivery to a blended learning delivery model. Ideally the conversion took place to leverage new pedagogical understandings and new technologies to improve student learning. The redesign of the courses also came about for economic and scheduling reasons. The result of this conversion was the creation of two new blended learning courses that were designed to be learner centered, constructivist, and reflective. In theory, two different courses were created demonstrating the possibilities available when applying theoretical practices to course redesign. In practice, this allowed pre-service teachers to experience a pedagogically appropriate course that they can use as a model later in their own professional practice. It also emphasized the importance of giving learners control of their learning, their time and valuing their input into course design.

INTRODUCTION

The research began at two different universities by two different instructors teaching two different university courses. The instructors were challenged to examine their own teaching practice in light of current research into Learner-Centered pedagogy (Harris and Cullen, 2008) and teacher reflection (Marcos & Tillema, 2006). Their experiences came together when both met and began to discuss new challenges faced in teaching in their respective university settings. Both instructors had backgrounds in the field of education. Both had also completed their PhD's in respective fields, which examined the impact of

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emerging technologies on teacher practice. One focused on the daily routines of face-to-face impact on teacher practice as technology came into the classroom, while the other focused on the impact of teacher practice related to online course instruction. The two worlds now came together as they discussed similar questions that they were now facing. The initial discourse was drawn from the discussion found in the book, *Technopoly* (Postman, 1993). Postman challenges the reader by asking central questions related to technology use in society. It was this debate that challenged the currently existing practices surrounding the two courses in this study and as areas were identified provided a vehicle to form the basis of considerations in planning and implementing of future course iterations in their respective universities.

The action research began in earnest when the two instructors were challenged to shift from a face to face delivery into a blended model of instruction leading towards fully online course delivery. The following section provides the details into the unfolding of the study.

BACKGROUND

University Setting 1

The first university setting was a large research intensive institution in a major western Canadian city. One of the researchers has taught a course in curriculum design to undergraduate education students. University students in the course were provided an opportunity to create unit plans for use in a social studies classroom. The work provided students with exploring the current curriculum in the field and applying it to real world classroom environments.

The course modelled a constructivist approach to learning. This provided students with an environment of learning that placed the learner at the center of their learning experience. There was a reflective component designed into this course as the researchers determined that reflective practice is an important skill for preservice teachers to develop (Howard, 2003). Students were asked to find out what they previously knew about teaching social studies and to examine this preconceived belief. The students were then to compare to what they envisioned teaching should be as they examined a number of different things including: government curriculum documents including the Program of Study, the instructional practices they observed or had experienced in classrooms, as well as the current issues that face teachers of social studies. Accompanying this focus, was also a parallel opportunity for students to test emerging ideas through collaboration in groupwork settings as they progressed through the semester of the course. Students worked in groups to develop their unit plans where they could challenge each other in gathering information, creating learning activities and assessments, and then produce lesson planning ensuring each lesson aligned to established standards set by the province of Alberta.

Another important area of consideration designed into the course was the area of feedback on projects from the instructor. Students were able to hand in specific components of their unit plans at three milestones. The feedback helped students to become aware of areas for improvement before the final draft was handed in. Combined with this feedback was the development of further personal connections with the instructor throughout the creation of the unit plans. This was accomplished by providing time in class to work on the unit plans. The instructor circulated from group to group and addressed various barriers or questions that students had. Combined together in groups, students were able to explore new ideas and test out notions that they thought might push the boundaries of what was expected. Many students approached their planning with renewed enthusiasm when offered opportunities to create unit

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