

Chapter XXXVI

Glad to Have Taken the STEPS: Aspects that Contribute to Success in an Online Learning and Teaching Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on aspects that contribute to successful online learning in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) bridging program at CQUniversity in Australia. The program, which aims to instill the aptitudes, values and attitudes for effective university study in interrupted adult learners, has been running for 22 years and has had an online component for off campus students since 2006. Among the challenges involved in developing the online program have been promoting the value of critical reflection, recognizing the importance of learning as process to complement a focus on learning as product, and configuring an effective constructive alignment between factors shaping the learning and teaching process. The role of teachers' reflective practices and students' use of an online discussion forum in meeting these challenges is explored.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on an ongoing research study featuring several stages of data gathering and enquiry focused on the online discussion forums

of the distance education (that is, external or off-campus) component of the STEPS bridging program at CQUniversity Australia. Previous publications emerging from this research have considered the role of the discussion forums in

fostering different forms of leadership among the students, on the one hand (Danaher, McDougall, Sturgess, & Todorovic, 2008a), and providing a space for self-reflection and challenging the institutional rigidity of the university, on the other (Todorovic, Sturgess, & Danaher, 2008b). This chapter discusses the ways in which the STEPS program more generally contributes to meaningful learning outcomes (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p. 96), based upon a constructive alignment supporting critical reflection and focusing on the learning process rather than product, and how the discussion forums along with teachers' reflective practices help to facilitate such outcomes.

As the research is still in an early stage of development, it is important to be cautious about the findings that emerge from it. That qualification notwithstanding, it is suggested that aspects of the STEPS program informed by the constructivist paradigm and associated theoretical underpinnings do contribute to success within an electronic teaching and learning environment.

The objectives of the chapter are:

- To emphasize the need for an ethos supportive of critical reflection within an educational institution. Considering some factors that facilitate such reflective practice within CQUniversity may illuminate an appreciation of how similar practices might be promoted in other contexts.
- To suggest that students and teachers' focus on the learning process, and not just the learning product, should be recognized as an achievement and as such accorded space within the curriculum. This study, therefore, aims to reveal certain aspects of teaching and learning that may promote this focus.
- To demonstrate how Biggs' (2003) notion of constructive alignment can provide a progressive learning framework for promoting constructivist learning principles.
- To use the situated learning context of the STEPS bridging program at Central Queen-

sland University as a case study for exploring these ideas.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the background and context influencing the development of the off-campus component of the STEPS program. It proceeds with a discussion of the theoretical framework and literature pertinent to the study, followed by an outline of the methodology applied to it, involving reflecting upon the institutional environment and STEPS teachers' work in shaping the program, along with supporting quotations from the discussion forum. After a discussion of the findings, provisional and qualified implications that the study might have for the broader context of e-learning are offered.

BACKGROUND

The STEPS bridging program has been offered through CQUniversity Australia (formerly known as Central Queensland University) since 1986, designed to enable learners without the conventional educational qualifications or background experiences to access university study and be effective at it. The program consists of the following four courses (1) Language and Learning, (2) Tertiary Preparation Studies, (3) Computing for Academic Assignment Writing, and (4) Transitional Mathematics. The first two of these courses teach and assess not only basic skills such as paragraph writing and referencing, but also incorporate reflective learning. Students are guided through the reflection on their own learning styles and temperament types, as well as prompted to articulate stages of their own learning journey. They reflect on their ordinary world before they embarked on their study and identify challenges they faced and support they found along the way. Joseph Campbell's (1993) model of a twelve-stage journey through lives of well-known heroes has been used to promote the need for ongoing regular reflections within the on-campus STEPS

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