

Facilitating the Shift From Teacher Centred to Student Centred University Teaching: Design Thinking and the Power of Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Design thinking is gaining momentum across the many fields of human endeavour, including education. Its use in education is predominantly to shape learning activities undertaken by students with the aim of nurturing the growth of desirable 21st century capabilities in students. There is relatively less attention given to the application of design thinking as a process for educators to engage in with the aim of developing curriculum and teaching practices that are characteristically student centred. In the present article, the author brings to the fore the suitability of design thinking as a process with the potential to further provoke the necessary shift in university teaching from teacher centred, instructive approaches towards the more desirable constructivist, and student centred approaches.

KEYWORDS

Constructivism, Curriculum Design, Design Thinking, Empathetic Perspective, Inquiry Methods, Instructivism, Student-Centred, Teaching Practice, User Centred Design

INTRODUCTION

Overcoming the inertia of the long-standing tradition of teacher centred instructive paradigms in university teaching is not easily, nor quickly, achieved. Despite the arrival of technology, the teaching approaches in universities have not changed all that much from what we were doing a 1000 years ago (Goodyear, 2015). Some degree of progress has been made towards embedding student centred university teaching approaches through an almost ‘brute force’ method with numerous professional development activities alongside institutional encouragement (or requirement) to take up student-centred approaches such as active learning and flipped classrooms. But, the implementation of such student centred strategies within the overall curriculum tends to be piecemeal, not truly permeating the learning experience. Hence, despite some isolated instances of student centred strategies within a university teachers’ practice, the nature of their teaching practice remains dominated by instructivist rather than student centred approaches. What is needed is a process or mindset to shape curriculum planning and teaching practice so that it is characteristically student-centred.

One of the factors contributing to the stubborn dominance of instructivist teaching practice in universities is that faculty are primarily discipline experts with strong content knowledge. Faculty often lack the base understanding of learning theory (especially constructivism and socio-constructivism) or pedagogical knowledge (Auerbach & Andrews, 2018), which is required to deliberately and fully embrace student centred learning strategies to the point that their teaching practice can be characterised as truly student centred. Furthermore, bringing about change in teaching practice is notoriously difficult, mostly because changing teaching practice involves the changing of deep-seated beliefs and values held about the nature of teaching and learning. The ‘change’ only becomes a possibility through an ongoing, iterative and cyclic process of reflection, ideation, experimentation, and evaluation – a process not dissimilar to what is required in design processes.

The idea of design crossing over into teaching and education is not novel. Diana Laurillard (1993) puts forward the view of teaching as design science. Teachers, says Laurillard, may not be able to fully match “the methodological rigor of a research team, but nonetheless there are sufficient parallels with what the ‘teaching professional does’ to make design thinking a useful approach (p. 7). A view supported more recently by others such as Goodyear (2015) who also advocates for the view of teaching as design.

Another junction point between design and education is design based research. Design based research draws on principles from both design and engineering, it is highly iterative and entails the implementation of classroom intervention, followed by a systematic study of the intervention in situ (Henriksen, Gretter, & Richardson, 2018). Design based research is based on the premise that initial designs are “rarely, if ever designed and implemented perfectly; thus there is always room for improvements in the design and subsequent evaluation... it is difficult to know when (or if ever) the research program is completed” (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012, p. 17).

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