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What is Learning Design?

Posted on June 30, 2010 by James Dalziel

The UMassOnline team welcomes Professor James Dalziel, Director, Macquarie ELearning Centre of Excellence (MELCOE) Macquarie University Sydney, NSW Australia as a guest blogger and to the extended UMassOnline community for an event featuring Professor Dalziel on July 8th. For those local to UMassOnline or planning to be in the area, please join us Thursday, July 8th at 9:30 at the Cermax Conference Center in Marlborough MA. Click to learn more about this event and reserve your seat. This is a great opportunity to explore, with your peers, learning design, identity management, technical standards and open community, content and software in education.

My academic career started with teaching introductory psychology classes to groups of 20 students. Despite all the preparation and background research I did on the topic of the week, and the class questions I used to try to foster discussion, I found that students sometimes didn't have much to say. Despite my good intentions, discussion was infrequent, and I would lapse into "mini-lectures" to fill up the silence. After many unsuccessful attempts at fostering discussion, I assumed that most of my students weren't interested in the topic or didn't like class discussion, and there wasn't much I could do about it.

I talked with a colleague in the university's central teaching support group about my situation, and he suggested I try a technique for fostering more class discussion. Instead of me standing up the front asking questions of the whole group, he suggested I give students an important question to think about on their own for a while and make some notes, then get students into pairs to talk about the question, and then later get each pair to join another pair to discuss the question as a group of four. After this, I could try discussion with the whole group.

It sounded like a good idea in theory to me, but I was doubtful that it would work with my group of students given my experience of them so far. To be honest, I thought I just had a "dud" group of students.

So in the next class I explained to the students what we were going to do, and then gave it a try. They seemed fine with thinking about the question on their own, then there were some logistical arrangements when we came to set up the pairs, but with a little patience they got into pairs and a few triplets, and then there was embarrassed silence. As the seconds passed I had a creeping feeling of terror - and I was about to interrupt and start lecturing when a few groups started talking, and then a few more, and pretty quickly every group was talking. As I watched the students discuss in pairs and later in groups of four, I noticed several students where I would have bet any money that they would not talk, and yet here they were talking animatedly about the topic - not what they did on the weekend - but the topic!

When I later tried to move to a whole class discussion, it took some time for my students to break away from their group discussion. Once they did, we had the liveliest discussion of the year, and many students participated, rather than just a vocal few. It seemed my students weren't a "dud" group after all.

This experience transformed me as a teacher: it changed the way I thought about my role in the class; it showed me that my assumptions about my students could be quite wrong; and I learned a new teaching method that could be used in many other contexts.

There are several interesting issues in this story, but I'd like to focus on just one - the new teaching method. This method was not specific to the topic (psychology), but was rather a sort of generic teaching "process" that could be used in many different disciplines. I received this method from another teacher - he was able to convey to me enough information about how to "run" the process that I could try it myself. As the years have passed, I've been able to pass it on to other teachers.

Ever since this experience, I have been fascinated by effective teaching "processes." Some can be quite brief, like stopping a video in the middle of a case study and asking students to write down what they think will happen next, and then continuing the video to see whether their guess was accurate. Others are more moderate in size, like the example I gave, which is sometimes called "think, pair, share" (with an extra share at the end). Other teaching methods can be quite "large" processes that might run over several classes or weeks, such as "Problem Based Learning" as often used in medical education contexts, where students in small groups confront a problem scenario (e.g., a patient with certain symptoms) which they need to interrogate, followed by research and data collection, then group debate and hypothesis testing (possibly involving a role play by a tutor who pretends to be the patient) and maybe further research, then concluding with a proposed solution and rationale for the solution, followed by feedback from a tutor.

My interest in teaching processes is driven by a hope that as more teachers learn and share these effective processes, we can improve the quality of education for many students.

In the digital context, we can take this idea one step further. We can use software to create these processes or "sequences" of student activities, and the software can help to share these sequences with other teachers, as well as "run" the sequences with students. This software is kind of like a cross between a Workflow system and a Learning Management System, and is called a Learning

Design system. My own work in this field has been on the development of the open source "LAMS" software and its community of practice for sharing sequences among educators - the LAMS Community.

There are several different descriptions of the field of "Learning Design," but rather than give you an academic analysis of competing definitions, I hope this story provides some idea of the underlying drivers of this area - the "why," not just the "what."

I look forward to sharing more about Learning Design with you on this blog and in person on Thursday, July 8, 2010.