

# Learning across the disciplines: an expanded view of student-centred flexible learning

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses how to design Professional Development courses that are attractive to students from the professions, and that maintain their quality. The latter is ensured by adopting a person-centred approach to these multi-disciplinary courses, where the total outcomes are addressed directly. Student motivation to study such courses is improved through the use of "buzz words". Case studies exemplify the concepts introduced above.

## **Introduction**

How can one design courses of learning that attract students in droves, leaving the competition standing, while at the same time producing units of instruction that have the highest educational value, and are able to fully deliver the stated objectives and produce happy students? This is surely the dream of all university teachers and managers.

But there are ways of coming close to this desired ideal, and this paper discusses some of them. Amongst other things, it addresses section 2.1 of LTOP Terms of Reference, which is concerned with "developing flexible learning strategies, particularly with respect to conceptual and operational definitions of flexible learning". Considerations are restricted to the case of educating professionals.

The paper proceeds by investigating why some professionally-oriented university courses are popular, and shows how the multi-disciplinary nature of many PD courses may be viewed from a new perspective (the person-centred approach to learning-teaching, based on the total outcomes concept) to facilitate and expedite their delivery without compromising quality.

It contends that a vital factor that makes courses popular is their inherent motivational value. What constitute these elements is considered.

The ideas above are discussed by looking at a recently-developed, and soon-to-be-developed, units of study within SIMS, FCIT. As always, there are likely to be problems and obstacles in the way of these proposals. These are briefly highlighted. The paper concludes by outlining a possible mode of implementation of these suggestions.

## **Educating the Professional**

To remain competitive, Monash must attract students for professionally-oriented courses by designing courses that can compete favourably with those offered by other universities. Such courses must be

- (i) relevant (ostensibly and overtly so!)
- (ii) easy to learn, and are perceived by the students to be such, but which nevertheless deliver the anticipated outcomes in their entirety

- (iii) contain a high level of intrinsic motivational value (i.e. that naturally motivate students to take up and learn the course)

A problem with PD courses is that the needs of professionals are usually multi-disciplinary. The traditional treatment involves the inclusion in the program of study, of several subjects which together provide the requisite knowledge. This process does not satisfy criterion (ii) above.

One solution is to develop multi-disciplinary courses which offer all the learning resources in the same unit.. Such an approach has been in practice for some time, (for instance, a unit labelled "material science" to address the multi-disciplinary needs of professionals such as textile manufacturers) .But to satisfy the integrated demands of any profession, one has to do more than merely create multi-disciplinary mixes . As a first requirement the ideal courses for such situations needs to

- (i) use novel teaching schemes and techniques, including the "person-centred" approach, to ensure that students leave with an understanding of their field that is coherent, holistic and above all, more developed than before
- (ii) (ii) pay attention to additional factors that actively attract students, e.g. the motivational factors mentioned above.

### **The Total Outcomes concept**

The choice of a person-centred approach to learning in multi-disciplinary situations needs further elaboration. Disciplines are by and large artificial constructs, that grow on their own accord and are maintained and regulated by their prevailing paradigms. The educational needs of the professional are, however, dictated by "real life" conditions, and need not be (and usually are not) bound by the disciplines. The traditional method of instruction typically involves exposing students to the respective relevant disciplines first, and then showing how they relate to and satisfy their professional needs. Not only is this time-consuming, but it detracts from the required outcomes of the course - and one never knows when they are actually achieved (or if indeed they are!).

The problem may be resolved by first characterising the PD course with a unique set of (professional) outcomes. The learning materials and teaching methods used in the delivery of such PD courses are then designed to address these outcomes directly, without any reference to a particular discipline. These outcomes form the set of total outcomes for the unit.

This mode of instruction is quite feasible. Indeed in ordinary intelligent conversation, one readily scales disciplinary boundaries, borrowing concepts from several disciplines to support the argument at hand. In the constructivist view, this person is actually using the established understandings of the disciplines as tools to develop his/her own understanding (the argument).

### **Motivational value of courses**

The inherent motivational value of courses may sound somewhat like begging the question. But this is not quite so. There are subjects/fields of interest that have acquired high social value of their own accord. For example, one must have heard

the expression "She's brilliant - she's into computers". Evidently people involved in the computing field are accorded high social standing. It follows that people (some people at least) would like to be seen to be associated with computing to benefit from its "shine and glory".

Further evidence for this comes in the following remark made by a key figure from a Victorian teaching professional organisation: "They all want to do education - they know it is useful. But they want to have the qualification from the Faculty of Computing." Thus courses that have a touch of IT in them have a natural appeal to some students. To elaborate on the above points, let us consider the following case studies.

### **Case Studies**

#### **Case 1. LAR5010 - (Developing Information Services in Schools)**

This PD unit for teacher-librarians and other school information professionals is an example where many of these considerations were entertained during unit development.

The aims of the unit is to provide teacher-librarians and other school information professionals with the necessary understandings to develop a school information (i.e. learning resource) service that rationalises and integrates the roles of the school library and the computing network, and makes full use of the emerging educational technologies.

The unit requires a background in learning principles and curriculum development, the concept of a school information system, and hands-on familiarity with computer-based educational technologies. These very disparate demands call for basic understandings in psychology, philosophy, systems analysis/management, and use computer technology.

The DE unit addresses the problem by taking a combined structured instruction/personal inquiry/contextual learning approach. Learning is enhanced by providing an internet-based forum for student interaction. Students are formally introduced through study guides to the basics of learning theory and philosophical issues by treating them in context (the nature of learning resources). They then build on this knowledge through directed readings, and reflect and critically evaluate them through investigative exercises. Open-ended activities at the end of each guide give them hands-on familiarity with the computer-based educational technologies.

Throughout the unit, care is taken not to mention any of the disciplines by name. The problem of setting up an information service that can serve the teaching-learning needs of staff and students in a school is addressed directly from the outset, the central theme being how to devise a system that delivers the learning resources.

The complex structure of the school information system is demonstrated by use of simple models that depict how the classroom, the library and the computer network interact with each other and the outside world, and are governed by the school curriculum. Use is made here of elements from Systems Analysis, a subject

traditionally taught within the Computing faculty. Once again, no mention is made about this connection to an established discipline.

We see that this unit

- is relevant to current needs of schools, where educational technology is rapidly overtaking and eclipsing the traditional roles of the library, urging Teacher Librarians to upgrade their position

- is made easy to learn (palatable) via use of several techniques based on the constructivist approach and adopting a person-centred view
- is made largely investigative and open-ended in nature
- benefits from the opportunity of situated learning of the necessary IT
- has a motivational content in the form of the computer-based educational technologies, especially the internet, and the facility for web tutorials.

### ***Case 2: Courses for the Accredited Teacher Professional Development Program***

This series of units is currently being developed for the Victorian government "Framework for Accredited Teacher Professional Development". The units will offer Victorian teachers "high quality flexibly delivered professional development modules" that can "build the credit towards a Graduate Certificate of Education (Professional Development) awarded by eight Victorian universities."

That the modules will be offered by the School of Information Management and Systems, (within the Faculty of Computing and Information Technology) already provides motivation for ready interest, as noted above. The delivery of these modules will adopt the same person-centred approach as outlined above, providing a program of structured instructions, learning in context, inquiry learning and copious exposure to Information Technology.

The modules have been chosen to illustrate areas of IT which are directly relevant to needs of practising teachers. The nature of these choices needs special mention. The modules are chosen so that.

1. they offer introductory lessons in areas that are traditionally taught only at Universities
2. they couple closely with courses that at least some teachers will be teaching at school. These are modules within the VET in Schools program. The present modules are designed so that they act as primer to these school modules. This should provide a compulsive reason for the VET in Schools teachers to take up these Monash units!

### **What are these "glitzy things"?**

In the two case studies, computer/IT were used as the buss expressions or the "glitzy things" that attracted students to the courses. Are these the only things that command such attention? One can immediately identify at least a few others. Here are a few examples:

The term ENVIRONMENT attracts instant attention these days. It may be associated with the sciences.

GLOBALISATION is a generic buzz word, referring to terms such as "multiculturalism" and "internationalisation", an "racism".

### **Problems and Solutions**

Possible problems:

1. The biggest danger is a perceived lack of motivation amongst Monash course developers themselves for these proposals, which may look like a potpourri of learning theory, business principles and ad hoc ideas. Because they do not fit any established paradigm, it is possible that they will fail to motivate the decision-makers, who are likely to have a disciplinary bias.

Possible responses in such cases could be

- where is the espoused theory? (the worry of some educational psychologists)
- have you done any research on this? (the immediate concern of some well-meaning educationists and physical scientists)
- what is all this worth in real terms? (a very business-like concern of the management).

Perhaps the only individual who could see it all is a sales and promotion expert with a background in education and consumer psychology. But s/he is probably not amongst us!

2. The disciplines may feel threatened. An immediate fear may be - are they trying to do away with us? (Is there some kind of insurrection afoot?. Such concerns are entirely groundless. Disciplines provide the "base states" of knowledge with which these newer understandings are developed. We cannot do without them. Doing away with their accumulated knowledge would be nothing short of re-inventing the wheel!

### **Towards a solution:**

We must first realise that these attempts to develop new learning-teaching systems is a process of learning. The Faculty of Education are the experts here. Indeed educationists have a ubiquitous role in all situations of change and adaptation. They are the ones who are in a position to fully understand the human interaction aspects that determine the way the public views new courses.

### **A likely scenario for action:**

Launch strategically placed person-centred PD courses within the faculties at the fringes of the main disciplines. Use buzz words to attract attention.

Examples:

Faculty Business and Economics

Use GLOBALISATION-derived buzz words, e.g. internationalisation, multiculturalism, racism etc.

Faculty of Science

Use the ENVIRONMENT buzz word

Faculty of Computing/Education

Offer joint PD programs and use the IT/INTERNET buzz word

### **Killing two birds:**

Launching such PDs at the fringes of disciplines will actually assist in promoting ailing disciplines as well as performing their main function of providing student-centred flexible learning for professionals .

### **References**

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