



Engaged and connected: embedding, modelling and practising what works

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The notion that there are no 'e-pedagogies' per se but rather 'e-flavours' of existing pedagogical approaches emphasises that 'good teaching is good teaching', irrespective of technologies – educational or otherwise. Charles Sturt University (CSU) recently released a Distance Education Strategy (2015) that promotes engagement and connectedness as key ideas in technology-enhanced teaching. Rather than prescribing particular activities to particular spaces or technologies, CSU's Online Learning and Teaching Model foregrounds seven elements known to support learning: small group support; personalised support; teacher presence; interaction between students; interaction with workplaces; interactive resources; and e-assessment. This paper argues the merits of an approach to learning and teaching which uses these seven elements to inform online teaching practices. The literature that supports each element is considered alongside examples of elements. The discussion considers curriculum that embeds, models and explicitly teaches these seven elements of the Learning and Teaching model to the University's academic staff.

Keywords: learning design, online learning, pedagogical labels, professional development.

Introduction

As argued by Mayes and de Freitas (2004), there are no 'e-pedagogies' per se, there are merely 'e-flavours' of existing pedagogical approaches. Yet, the search for 'e-pedagogies' which might galvanize academics' understanding of and approach to flexible, learner-centred, technology-enhanced learning continues—possibly to the detriment of good teaching practice and sensible, evidence-based discussion. In the context of both blended learning and flipped approaches, for example, despite a considerable buzz around the notion of widely applicable approaches to integrating technology into place-based teaching, there are no universally-agreed upon definitions. Both blended and flipped approaches allow for substantial variation in the sorts of teaching and learning activities promoted and the degrees of technology integration required. Thus, all too often, the basis of many flipped and blended learning definitions are unexamined generalisations about the use of technology, the roles of teachers to support productive learning activity and the relationships between the learners' activity and the achievement of learning outcomes. These generalisations result in several problems with technology-enhanced teaching, including a view of educational technologies as prescriptive of particular approaches to teaching, a limited view of the range of teaching practices that can be enhanced with technology and how, the implementation of a limited range of online activities and axiomatic claims about what constitutes good teaching.

While Charles Sturt University (CSU) still uses the term 'blended' in its learning and teaching discourses, the university's recently released Distance Education Strategy, *Destination 2020: A Road Map for CSU's Online Future* (Wills, Dalgarno & Olcott, 2015), promotes engagement and connectedness as key ideas in technology-enhanced teaching. Rather than prescribing particular activities to particular spaces or technologies, CSU's Online Learning and Teaching Model foregrounds seven elements that are known to support learners and learning: small group support; personalised support; teacher presence; interaction between students; interaction with workplaces; interactive resources; and e-assessment.

This paper argues the merits of an approach to learning and teaching which uses these seven elements to inform online teaching practices and considers the literature that supports each element

as well as examples of each element. The basis of this argument is that “good teaching is good teaching” (Ragan, 1998) and that the principles which underpin good teaching in campus-based education are the same as those which underpin good technology enhanced (or online) teaching. The differences between these modes are in how the principles are enacted. The discussion considers the redesign of a subject in CSU’s professional development program, the Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (GCLTHE), to embed, model and explicitly teach the seven elements of the Online Learning and Teaching model. A central point is that these seven elements simply emphasise good teaching practices without particular reference to technology. In considering the implementation of the elements, the context of a technology-enhanced subject informs practical decision making about enacting the seven elements of the CSU Online Learning and Teaching Model. So, in the example provided, the elements provide both neat triggers for academic teaching staff to audit and reflect on their current practices in addition to highly practical pegs from which to hang learning and teaching activities. Working through practical examples of engagement and connectedness in the GCLTHE and setting assessment tasks that require learners to interact with their workplace, provide teaching academics with scaffolded support to redesign their own curriculum to, in turn, better support their students with engaging and connected programs.

Posing the problem

Teaching is not a science. Historically, teaching practices in higher education have been heavily influenced by teachers’ prior experiences and less by informed debate about how students learn (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003), how to teach particular disciplines (Young, 2010), how particular cohorts learn (Arkoudis, 2010) and how to best use technologies to support learning (Conole & Oliver, 2007). Teachers can be a passionate bunch; indeed, passion for both teaching and one’s discipline are key characteristics that define the teaching professional. Arguably, however, any teaching approach – technology-enhanced or not – holds no inherent guarantee of either student engagement or learning. The art of teaching and the lived learning experience are far more complex than any single teaching approach or technology can accommodate or claim credit for. Experienced teachers use their knowledge, expertise and understanding of their learning cohort to develop effective, engaging learning experiences and it seems that much of this learning design work is unconsciously done. In part because of the proliferation of technologies and the multiple learning affordances of technologies, we need teachers to be explicit, conscious and deliberate about learning design (Conole, 2010). Common perceptions of online teaching practices are often negative: “Many online learning platforms consist of passive video lectures and podcasts” (Pedago, 2014). The practice of digitizing existing materials and ‘putting things online’ is not going to improve bad teaching practice. Price reminds us that “a lack of imagination in course design can’t be rescued simply by being digitised” (Price, 2013: 137). Good teachers need to be good designers for an online context. A similar case was argued in the context of comparing distance education with on campus teaching. As Ragan (1998) points out, ‘Good teaching is good teaching.’ The fundamentals of good teaching practice remain unchanged across modes of delivery and medium. What changes is how those fundamental principles of good teaching are enacted.

Educators should focus on effective teaching approaches that are known to engage and connect students – with other students, with ideas, with teaching and support staff or with professional networks. The rhetoric of educational labels often align particular teaching and learning activities with specific spaces and technologies. Courses that are ‘blended’ or ‘flipped’ attract attention, but those approaches must be applied thoughtfully. A focus on sound teaching practices informed by what the student does could both prove less controversial and provide a more accurate picture of teaching activities (Land & Hannafin, 2000). Of course, a focus on what the student does is what good teachers do. Education is perennially plagued by binarily represented arguments – online and face-to-face, traditional and progressive, lectures or flipped – when, really, good teachers will use whatever teaching approaches or technologies that are appropriate. CSU’s focus on engagement and connectedness in relation to teaching approaches irrespective of technology or mode, then, is useful and timely.

An approach: the relationship between pedagogy and practice

The networked learning community has described relationships between pedagogy and practical activity within an organisational context (Steeple, Jones & Goodyear, 2002). The networked learning model includes a pedagogical framework that both influences and is influenced by the activity within an educational setting. The pedagogical framework is conceived in four levels of activity, from most

abstract, to most concrete: philosophical commitments, high level pedagogy, pedagogical strategy and pedagogical tactics. Careful alignment between these four levels of the pedagogical framework supports coherent pedagogical practice. Those pedagogical practices manifest within the educational setting as: a) the development of learning tasks; b) the selection or creation and sequencing of learning resources; c) technology and media choices as part of the structure of the learning environment; and, d) situated teaching practices. Each of these, in turn, influence learner activity and, ultimately, learning outcomes.

This networked learning model (Steeple, Jones & Goodyear, 2002) can be used to describe the relationship between a set of pedagogical commitments and the practical activities which are implied by those commitments. In the case of the CSU Online Learning Model (Wills, Dalgarno & Olcott, 2015), at the philosophical level, the pedagogical framework is influenced by subjectivist epistemology and relativist ontology. The high level pedagogical influences are constructivist, particularly social constructivist. Learning is viewed as an active, constructive process in which learners are generators of meaning. Learning is essentially a meaning-making endeavour in which learners acquire and apply knowledge, skills and other capabilities to respond to authentic problems. Steeples et al.'s (2002) networked learning model is predicated upon the idea of connectedness; it has strong correlations with CSU's Online Learning Model which emphasises learner engagement, i.e., engagement with the subject or topic, with other learners, with the teacher as an authoritative supporter of learning, with the organisation or institution which accredits the learning and with the community, workplace or other setting which provide contexts for authentic learning. As part of the CSU Online Learning Model, seven elements are identified which describe pedagogical strategies (Steeple, Jones & Goodyear, 2002) promoted in online learning at CSU.

Steeple, Jones and Goodyear's (2002) pedagogical framework consists of a set of pedagogical commitments that are applied within the organisational context. The philosophical level includes the organisational mission and values as well as the epistemology, ontology and axiology (among others) that inform the choice of a high level pedagogical approach. The high level pedagogy describes a general approach to learning and teaching that is relatively abstract, but instantiates the theoretical commitments established in at the 'philosophy' level. The levels of pedagogical strategy and pedagogical tactics describe increasingly concrete pedagogical intention and action. 'Strategy' describes intentions for coherent, coordinated action, 'high level pedagogy' and 'pedagogical tactics' describe responsive, situated activity – such as engagement and connectedness, specific types of engagement and the seven elements of Online Learning and Teaching respectively.

CSU's Online Learning and Teaching Model

Charles Sturt University (CSU)'s recently released Distance Education (DE) strategy (Wills, Dalgarno & Olcott, 2015) has moved away from labels like 'blended' learning and instead promotes engagement and connectedness as key strategies in curriculum design. The high level pedagogy of the Online Learning and Teaching model builds on Moore's (1989) ideas about engagement to include:

- Learner-teacher engagement
- Learner-learner engagement
- Learner-content engagement
- Learning-workplace/community engagement
- Learner-institution engagement.

The five types of engagement are essential features of a holistic learning experience which provide a rich context for seven pedagogical tactics known to support learning: small group support; personalised support; teacher presence; interaction between students; interaction with workplaces; interactive resources; and e-assessment.

Teacher presence

The relationship between learners and the teacher is a powerful influence on learner activity, engagement and, ultimately, learning (Ramsden, 2003). In online learning, in which the learner and teacher are physically removed from one another and communication and interaction are mediated by technology, teacher presence facilitates the development of learner-teacher relationships in online learning by enhancing students' experience of the teacher as not only present in the online environment, but playing a supportive role as an agent of the university (see Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999). Teachers make visible demonstrations of their presence and activity through the way

the learning materials are presented, the structure of the learning environment, facilitation and participation in learning dialogues and forms of direct instruction such as responding to student questions and providing feedback (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Ultimately, teacher presence works to facilitate the social and cognitive processes that constitute learning.

Interaction between learners

Interaction is nearly taken for granted as part of learning processes (Mayes, 2006). However, this element focuses specifically on interaction between learners and the possibilities created by mediating technologies for peer interaction amongst distributed groups of learners. Beuchot and Bullen suggest that “the potential for interaction is the most salient and most influential characteristic of computer conferencing; it alters the nature of learning and increases its quality” (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005: 69). The focus on interaction between learners emphasises the view of learning as a social process. A number of pedagogical approaches and models leverage social processes to support learners’ efforts to engage in productive activity and to make sense of their experiences (for example, social constructivism in general (Prawat & Flowden, 1994; Hung and Chen, 2001) and specific approaches including Community of Inquiry (Garrison *et al.*, 1999) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998)).

Small group activity and support

Further to the previous points about the teacher presence, learner-learner interaction and social learning, online social structures such as study groups are an important way to support learners’ purposeful learning activity (Kehrwald, 2005). The technology in online learning provides opportunities for social connectivity and the formation of groups or other social structures which transcend physical and temporal constraints. The formation of groups as part of learning activity can provide supportive structure for productive learning activity (Thorpe, 2002). Under the guidance of skilled online facilitators, small groups can provide learners with academic, administrative, organisational and effective support within structured learning processes (Ryan, 2001).

Personalised support

Personalisation of learning is an important theme in contemporary higher education. A focus on personalisation emphasises learners’ agency in learning processes and responsibility for their own learning (McLaughlin & Lee, 2008). However, as pedagogical approaches increasingly acknowledge shared control with and greater responsibility of learners, the needs for learner support need to be redefined to address the need for a different kind of responsive, learner-centred support for learning. Partly, this approach relies on interpersonal interaction to support individuals in the terms that they wish to express themselves (Thorpe, 2002). But, increasingly, learner experiences and learner support can be personalised through the use of flexible (or open) pathways, inclusive teaching practices and learner support strategies informed by learning analytics (see, for example, Buckingham Shum & Ferguson, 2012; Siemens & Long, 2011). By identifying both the needs of individual students and students at risk then using adaptive learning approaches, institutions can cultivate more productive relationships with each learner and provide a more coherent learning experience.

Interactive resources

The use of interactive resources provides an additional form of interaction and engagement beyond the previously described learner-teacher and learner-learner interaction. Dynamic content and rich media create opportunities for experiential engagement with learning materials and content. Quite simply, rich media learning objects provide access to information and ideas (Sosteric & Hesemeier, 2002) and can improve learners’ access to information by presenting ideas in multiple modes. Rich media can improve the cognitive accessibility of information through the integration of still images, moving images, audio and text. The addition of interactivity changes the nature of the user experience to emphasise active engagement and create the potential for a more dynamic learning experience. Used as part of authentic, interactive learning designs and online learning experiences facilitated by skilled teaching staff, interactive resources can enhance student engagement and cater to a greater range of learning preferences.

Interaction with workplaces

The use of authentic problems and real-world contexts supports learning (Herrington, Reeves and Oliver, 2006). Moreover, learning occurs in a diverse range of sites, most of which are beyond the edges of university campuses. An emphasis on learners' interaction with workplaces addresses the need for authenticity and acknowledges the learning that takes place as part of professional practice. The use of online and mobile technologies create opportunities to more explicitly link workplace activity and formal learning and to extend higher education beyond the university campus (see, for example, Pachler, Pimmer & Seipold (2011) for a collection of cases). As a reflective and communal space, too, online sites provide vital spaces for students in disparate working roles to connect: 'the workplace' is effectively multiplied and amplified and students are better able to generalise their personal learning at work (Woodley & Beattie, 2011). Learners can move from an individual workplace experience to a community of fully participatory novice professionals in a structured and safe online place (Woodley & Beattie, 2011).

e-assessment

Assessment and feedback are critical parts of education and learning. Therefore, it is essential to maintain high standards in the design and implementation of assessment and the provision of feedback to support learning. e-assessment helps online educators enact good practice by supporting flexible and inclusive learning and teaching practices. Educational technologies facilitate a diverse set of authentic assessment practices ranging from computer-based exams, dynamic online presentations and remote exam invigilation to digital versions of traditional scholarly writing, to the creation of rich-media records of authentic professional practice. These technologies also support the provision of timely, personalised feedback in a variety of media that can reinforce the teacher presence.

In the next section, we consider the operationalisation of these seven elements in one CSU subject.

Embedding, modelling and practising

The Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (GCLTHE), like most university teacher development programs, provides a vehicle through which the university can disseminate learning and teaching policies, values and quality assurance processes. Learning within the program explicitly refers to university systems, support people and policies and encourages academics to become conscious designers of effective learning experiences (Conole, 2010). The program aims to also model basic good teaching. Using the seven elements of CSU's Learning and Teaching model to structure and provide content for a subject in the program offers a chance to both demonstrate and evaluate the utility of the model. The case in point is the GCLTHE online subject *Designing for Blended Learning in Higher Education*.

Within the design of *Designing for Blended Learning in Higher Education*, the seven elements from the Online Learning and Teaching Model provide both neat triggers for academic staff to audit and reflect on their current teaching practices and highly practical pegs from which to hang learning and teaching activities. The subject design provides teaching academics with scaffolded support to examine and redesign their own curriculum to, in turn, better support their students with engaging and connected programs. Within that process, the seven elements have the capacity to provide a pattern and a structure to a learning experience. A key reason to include explicit reference to the elements is to encourage academics to consciously consider them when designing learning activities and to align their practice to CSU Learning and Teaching initiatives.

Embedding

An early collaborative activity can be completed either as a Wiki or in Google docs. The seven elements of the Learning and Teaching Model are presented in tabular form: learners are asked where, in their own curriculum, they can find examples of each element and to describe the example. The following elements of the Learning and Teaching model are embedded: interaction between learners, interaction with workplaces and teacher presence (self-reflexively, the teacher begins the population of the table with examples from *Designing for Blended Learning in Higher Education*). The

activity results in a collaboratively produced document that shares learning and teaching activities. Furthermore, CSU's Online Learning and Teaching can be seen as building on what teachers already do.

Modelling

Personalised support is explicitly modelled through frequent communications in Announcements, the Discussion Forum, in feedback on formative and summative assessment (including using audio) and in emails. The tone of each communication is crafted to be friendly but professional – and, mostly, to be enthusiastic and encouraging. One simple example of communication that also incorporates analytics is that Announcements go straight to university email. If learners have not yet logged into the subject, they will get an email along the lines of: “According to Blackboard analytics, 6 people have not yet accessed the site and 4 people have not yet posted in Discussion – if that is you, expect an email later today! ☺” Learners are reminded of the ease with which even basic analytics of Blackboard can provide prompts for early reminders to learners to engage. The capacity of Blackboard to monitor learners' activity is one thing: reminding learners that it is their role as teachers to remind their learners is the modelling. Blackboard's Survey tool, too, is used to gauge learner's awareness of particular theories, university policies and technologies. Survey results also serve to support a more tailored if not personalised learning design. Beyond analytics, personalised support is evidenced in personal, tailored responses to students both in Discussion threads and via emails. Individual responses to Posts acknowledging ideas and suggesting resources create a personal learning experience in a social context. These teaching approaches have the teacher presence at their core but also embed personalised support.

Practising

Various activities see learners practising, in supported ways, learning with unfamiliar technologies or Blackboard functions that are typically underutilised. For example, small group support is worked into an e-assessment task that asks students to present and facilitate discussion online in groups of 4-5. The activity embeds small group support, interaction between learners, teacher presence (the teacher provides feedback on each session) and e-assessment. Other engaged and connected activities include contributing to the subject's glossary, collaborating on a Wiki that aligns particular technologies with scaffolding learning activities as well as activities that model teacher presence (such as emailing draft assessment tasks in a formative sequence).

The most useful aspect of the seven elements of CSU's Learning and Teaching Model is that they are entirely practical and decidedly sensible to academic teaching staff who are not from educational backgrounds: that is, they make sense, are easily operationalised and support teachers in designing curriculum. More broadly, a range of teaching and learning activities in *Designing for Blended Learning in Higher Education* exemplify the elements of CSU's Learning and Teaching model.

Teacher presence

Teacher presence can readily be seen in activities such as regular teacher-generated bulletins, video snippets to provide multi-modal teacher presence, regular participation in ongoing subject discussions, personalised responses to each student's posts, personalised contact with students who are identified 'at risk' according to CSU metrics and personalised and contextualised feedback on assessment items.

Interaction between learners and small group activity and support

Activities that encourage interaction between learners and small group activity and support are evident in some assessment tasks that require incorporating peer review and in other explicitly designed collaborative activities that ask for whole group input. The purposeful formation of learning groups for the final presentation also exemplifies these elements as do learning tasks which require regular interaction between learners, using Google Docs and Blackboard's Wiki, and collaborative assessment.

Personalised support

While many of the examples of teacher presence are also examples of personalised support, this element is also evidenced in the creation of flexible study pathways, flexible arrangements about assessment and using learning analytics and other CSU tools and metrics to identify students at risk

and to provide individual support.

Interactive resources

Of all of the elements in CSU's Online Learning and Teaching model, the area of appropriate interactive resources perhaps needs a greater lead in time for designers and teachers. While the use of rich media learning objects is planned for the subject, they are not yet in use. However, various other dynamic resources, multimodal resources, open and flexible resources are in use. An additional aspect of this elements is an assessment task that asks students to devise a plan to make their own open educational resources (OERs).

Interaction with workplaces

The Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education is for CSU staff, so the context, the purpose and the content all focus on interaction with the workplace. In-house teaching qualifications seek to develop academics as teachers and are part of a national push to improve the quality of teaching at Australian universities (Ling, 2009). The range of learners from disciplines as diverse as veterinary science and dentistry to information systems and agriculture mean that the communal reflections (Woodley and Beattie, 2011) of this online community serve to multiply and expand CSU as a workplace and to provide students with a rich sense of the university. All assessment is highly experiential with a focus on teachers' own practices - their assessment, their teaching approaches and their students. Learning and assessment tasks are linked to authentic activity of academics as well as CSU processes, tools, policies and support staff.

e-assessment

E-assessment in this subjects is interpreted both broadly (as in assessment activities that are supported, completed and submitted online) and narrowly (as in the use of the CSU-developed Electronic Assignment Submission Tracking System (EASTS)). Feedback, too, on assessment is via personalised comments and track changes function in word, videos for whole of class feedback as well as a range digital marketing approaches including audio feedback. Each assessment piece requires students to use and/or explore different technologies and to especially exploit the collaborative capacity of online communication tools.

Conclusion

Beyond pedagogical labels, as Cedar Riener Tweeted in a text speak Tweet: "many teachers just trying to tweak pedagogy to be better, build bridges to students, etc. Many don't care abt label" (Reiner, 2013). CSU's seven elements manage to sidestep anything like controversial or ill-defined educational labels to focus on what the student does. Kearsley (2000) argues that "the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure a high degree of interactivity and participation" (Kearsley, 2000: 78). CSU's Learning and Teaching model supports that idea.

"Learning is interactive when learners are actively engaged in a variety of activities, and along with their peers and teaching, they are co-constructors of knowledge" (Chamberlain & Vrasidas, 2007: 79). This broad definition of interactivity gestures towards the idea of students as generators of meaning: a role that the internet facilitates. Engaged and developmental learning through a mix of activities that acknowledges constructivism as an effective learning design is not new (Bornstein, 1989). Such approaches recognise that content acquisition is not sufficient for an education and that a broader engagement is needed: "in an engaged learning environment, each learner's actions contribute not only to individual knowledge but to overall communication development as well" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004: 5). Engaged learning can be collaborative. It includes students collaborating with lecturers to establish learning goals or negotiating assessment, students locating, critiquing and sharing appropriate resources and ongoing assessment – including peer assessment (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). New media offers ever increasing opportunities for engaged and connected collaborative learning experiences.

Engaged learning does not emphasise technology for any particular type of teaching. Engaged learning is concerned with what the student does: face-to-face, online, in the community and in the workplace. Is teaching more art than science? No single pedagogical approach or theory is likely to define or accurately depict what goes on in the teaching and learning space. We need to have more teaching approaches in our arsenal, not just a chosen few, and approaches do not need to be hierarchised – they just need to be available. Teaching approaches need to focus on the learner – not

the definition, not the technology.

CSU's Online Learning and Teaching model seeks to develop a range and a pattern of activities that creates a learning continuum. The engagement of students has often been measured by indicators such as time spent studying, class hours, time spent in extra-curricular activities. The model aims to focus on approaches that "combine pedagogy and learning technologies in ways that extend to large numbers of student's opportunities for deep learning through application and consolidation" (Sankey & Hunt, 2013: 787). CSU's Learning and Teaching model recognises that there are no e-learning models, only e-enhancements of existing learning (Mayes & De Freitas, 2004). The move away from hyperbolic educational labels augurs well for a focus on what learners actually do.

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