THE VIRTUAL PEDAGOGY INITIATIVE REVISITED

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Update to:

Peter Reddy, Jon Wood, Michael Butler and Carl Senior ***Herzfeldt, R (2009) "The Virtual Pedagogy Initiative Revisited", in Aston Business School Good Practice Guide to Teaching and Learning, Vol. 6, pp 18-30.***

http://www1.aston.ac.uk/clipp/learning-innovation/ltr-good-practice-guides/

Introduction

The VPI paper (*The virtual pedagogy initiative* Senior, Butler, Wood and Reddy) was published in 2009 and revisiting it is a salutary lesson in how much Higher Education has changed in four years. The new funding strategy for student loans and fees, year-on-year changes to core and margin admissions procedures, the adverse economic situation and visa restrictions have radically changed the parameters in which we operate. The full effects are yet to be felt and may not be those anticipated. The results of the National Student Survey (NSS) and the league tables it informs have become very important, perhaps eclipsing even the impact of the research excellence framework.

Technology Development

The VPI responded to calls for expansion and widened participation in HE and advocated e-learning strategies to facilitate flexible learning around the needs and expectations of students. It suggested that contemporary undergraduates could be considered 'digital natives' and may therefore be qualitatively different. Four technologies were proposed (podcasts, vodcasts, mobile telephony and campus wide remote broadcasts). Leaving aside the debate over the extent to which current students really are different and 'digitally native', what was proposed in the VPI is in good measure now established and routinely expected by students. The recording of lectures at Aston and elsewhere is widespread and increasing, both as audio (previously podcast) and video (vodcast) files and these are available on the Aston Blackboard™ VLE. Two systems are in operation, one lecture capture system records teaching events so that those present can revise and re-listen, and absentees can catch up. The other creates dedicated A/V resources for distance learning students and overseas partners.

There has not been much demand for campus-wide remote broadcasts and the potential of mobile telephones and related devices has yet to be realised. Senior (2009) explored the educational potential of text messages but found that students experienced them as an intrusion into their personal lives and a breach of privacy. What we thought of then, however, as a telephone has become an increasingly sophisticated palm-top computer embracing the functions of camera, video camera and player, photo-album, music, video and personal data store, calculator, portable television, portable music player, voice recorder, video phone, diary, bar-code reader, and payment card. Just as the take-up of text messaging was a surprise, the coming together of mobile phones and lap-top computers and the growth of e-readers and two sizes of tablet device may open up a range of uses that are not presently apparent.

The promise of the VPI was twofold, technology that would transform learning, teaching and assessment and, something perhaps distinctive to Aston, a grassroots led, bottom-up approach to the adoption and application of the technology. The technology moves on, but have our expectations and attitudes to what it can do and where it fits changed?

Expectations

A first change follows from the monumental importance of NSS. Four years ago many academics thought little and talked less about NSS, league tables, assessment and feedback and the student experience. This was left to specialists and grassroots enthusiasts. Now we all own NSS, I used to tell sceptical programme directors how important NSS was, now they tell me. It has become the performance indicator all watch. Every academic teaching a module, each year tutor, undergraduate programme director, subject lead, head of a school or department feels that their performance is judged and is important. Before NSS, or while scores rose, grassroots initiatives could blossom at will. Once NSS became noticed, or scores stagnated, or (heaven forbid) declined, it was much too important to be left without direction. Grassroots initiatives let a hundred flowers bloom but once the potential of a technology has been established someone has to decide how many parallel software systems a modest university can sustain, establish the benefits of internal cooperation and a common face to the market place and ensure that the student experience is a good and consistent one.

The growing potential of technology has also opened up a window for all not only to provide flexibility to their full-time students (notionally full-time, almost all work part-time) but also to enter the distance learning market. This has raised many issues. Doing distance learning well is demanding and time consuming, as the Open University experience shows. This is a specialist area, recording teaching, and making it available because the technology allows it, is only a part of what is required. Skimped distance learning will inevitably lead to very low completion rates and poor student satisfaction. A comprehensive package is necessary. Interestingly the Open University has some of the best NSS scores in the country.

The risk of a technology-led approach, and not only in distance learning, is that it may fail to recognise two key features of higher education; that it is much more than the transmission of information and that relationships are critical to learning. Information and ideas require working on, through discussion, debate, analysis and application, in order to really become part of our mental furniture. This really benefits from relationship honed through tutorials, seminars, project work and informal discussion. Interestingly the best Distance Learning programmes provide a great deal of this, the Open University for example through open tutorials, telephone calls to tutors, and summer schools as well as email and VLE based discussion forums. The lecture can be replaced, but it is not the heart and soul of education. One logical consequence of this line of reasoning is the development of the MOOC, the massive on-line open course of the kind being made available by some very high profile North American universities. This is early days to pin the MOOC phenomenon down. Are they about allowing the masses to access elite education? A widening-participation political statement? Strengthening the brand so that Yale or MIT remain as well known and bankable as IBM and Apple? If many sign up and pay only for assessments will they do to less celebrated universities what Amazon are doing to the British high street? (It is goodbye to HMV as I write this).

Whatever the ultimate business model, the existence of MOOCS should remind us that global university brands are powerful. If they want to attract our students we need to be clear that the university education we offer embraces the whole experience. A ‘course’ is much more than access to on-line materials, a reading list and an exam at the end. By all means embrace the technology but this is a good time to celebrate and reinforce the central importance of relationships, personal contact, debate and discussion in producing deep learning.

Reference

Senior, C., Butler, M., Wood, J. and Reddy, P. (2009). ‘The virtual pedagogy initiative’, in J. Green and H. Higson, *Good Practice Guide in Learning and Teaching*, volume 6. Quality Unit. Aston Business School.

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