Online Learning and Social Presence: 
Developing Tertiary Students’ Skills of Critique

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ABSTRACT

Devising pedagogical strategies that will engage students in ways which will assure the development of their skills of critique and analysis presents a challenge to tertiary teachers. This paper draws on data from a recent case-based evaluation study to argue that innovative assessment and the development of social presence in online learning environments can contribute to developing skills of critique and analysis in tertiary students. The paper is underpinned by the belief that creative thinking about curriculum issues must continue to lead debates about tertiary pedagogy, the use of educational technologies and online learning. It concludes by posing implications for further research in pedagogical practices in tertiary settings.

Keywords: assessment; case study; Constructivism; postgraduate education; technology-enhanced learning

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical approaches that are embedded in constructivism mean that tertiary teachers ought to offer students opportunities to be active learners. Such approaches should see students engaged in learning tasks that are relevant and directed towards mutually conceived learning outcomes. We believe this is imperative in undergraduate and postgraduate class-rooms, particularly where such classrooms are becoming more diverse. Here we acknowledge the growth in full-fee paying international students, the imperatives of information and communication technologies to develop pedagogical models of flexibility, “creeping credentialism,” that is, the imperative for lifelong learning and qualifications as one crucial step in assuring career progression, as well as the demands of more sophisticated learners.
Therefore tertiary education ought to exploit the student’s existing knowledge and experience. It ought to engage learners in meaningful, relevant and authentic learning experiences including assessment tasks. Such a curriculum approach aims to promote opportunities for active learning and collaboration where students are engaged in deep learning experiences that develop their capacities to be self-reflective and critical. Deep learning is considered to be critical and transformative where students develop the capability to:

relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience; check evidence and relate it to conclusions; examine the logic of argument cautiously and critically; become actively interested in the course content; and look for patterns and underlying principles. (Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1998, p. 19)

This article uses a case-based evaluation study of a curriculum unit1 to raise broader issues related to social presence in online learning environments and innovative assessment as determinants of successful learning. As a case study it provides “an evidentiary boundary around which to discuss educational problems” (Walker, 2001, p. 10), and in this case the educational problematic rests with the challenges of engaging students in forms of discourse that contribute to the development of skills of critique and analysis.

THE STUDY FOCUS

In previous years, students in this particular unit (a postgraduate unit concerned with financial computation and investment decision-making) claimed that they enjoyed the unit and assessment tasks very much because they were aligned with their practical, applied interest in investments. While students appreciated the link between the assignments, the unit coordinator was often dissatisfied and disheartened with what he considered was limited critical debate and discussion amongst the student cohort around substantive curriculum content.

To be a literate investor it is essential that investment decisions be based on a prudent process, including: sound reasoning (considering all available resources), ongoing monitoring of investment performance and the incorporation of new information to modify risk exposure. A discourse among student peers, where they are given opportunities to reflect, debate and compare investment performance, is an ideal way to encourage this process. While the students in the unit are forced, weekly, to present their portfolios to their peers (and hence to monitor their investment performance), the unit coordinator believed that a potentially more valuable, ongoing discourse of critique and analysis was not occurring both inter and intra group as much as he had hoped. In other words, a new strategy was needed as it became apparent that students were not engaged in an ongoing discourse about their investment decisions as hoped in their large groups (of 10). Instead, only those students responsible for investment decisions on any one week were considering the issues involved in changing their portfolios.
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