

Online Learning Philosophy – Debra Beach

My general philosophy of education is that learners must be able to construct knowledge from experience by meaningful problem solving and analysis. It is my experience along with research that leads me to the conclusion that meaningful authentic learning takes place when the learning experience is formed around the learner, takes his/her interests and needs into consideration, and provides an environment in which they can actually experience the subject matter. Online learning is no exception. Materials must be provided in a variety of ways in order to meet the varied learning needs of the learners. (Gutek, 2004)

Learner Independence

To be sure the learner has more control and independence to learn when and how they choose in the online venue. Depending upon the learner this is either good or bad because self-motivation must be present for an online learning experience to be a success. This trait is more often found in adults than children/young adults and in the case of adults may be the result of maturity. Maturity levels may be attributed for the lack of self-motivation in youth, but the spoon-fed methods of educational institutions may contribute to the deficiency of development.

Supporting Factors

Much has been written on the quality of online learning and how to make it more effective and meet learning outcomes. The application of pedagogical and andragogical theory to the presentation of content online and implications of the efficacy of those learning experiences has also been widely discussed. The paragraph on Individual Learning in Web-based Environments by Miller (2001) quotes Landow, (1997); McKnight, Dillon & Richardson (1996); Brown, (1997); and Laszlo & Castro, (1995) who point out many ways that web-based learning benefits learners. Some of the points made are that learning can: be self-led, active, non-linear, encourage exploration, aid in construction of knowledge and meaning, encourage self-motivation, promote critical thinking, and allow for learning based upon the learners current knowledge level and experience. (p. 278)

Challenges

From my experience as an online learner, and recent work evaluating the efficacy of a universities online classes I found most online offerings rely almost exclusively on text-based content. Most recently among 110 university online classes that I evaluated, some of which were recently migrated from face-to-face to online, many simply used course packs as primary content. Yes there were

presentations included in some of the courses, but all these elements could also be found in the learner's textbook and accompanying CD.

Faculty who teach the courses I evaluated vary greatly from experienced in online teaching, competent the practical application of online pedagogy/andragogy, and fluent in the required technologies, to new to online teaching, not versed on online learning theories, and severely technologically challenged (e.g. cannot cut and paste text, find and open a browser, save/find/upload/download files, etc). The challenged instructors must overcome huge obstacles. Those deficient in basic technologies struggled to become quickly fluent and technologically self-sufficient. While many were good instructors, their lack of technology skills negatively affected their efficacy as an online instructor. In cases like these unless those in higher management at an educational institution require basic online instruction literacy tests, the quality of their online offerings will greatly suffer. As Sims, Dobbs, and Hand (2002) state "institutions are frequently demanding their (online learning environments) implementation without necessarily having staff competent in all aspects of online pedagogy...and we also still have much to learn about online learning environments" (p. 135).

References

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