

Chapter 3

Profiling “Future Learners” to Design and Develop Teaching and Learning Based on Anticipated Future Needs

ABSTRACT

Who are future learners in higher education? In the simplest sense, these are the individuals who will experience a particular learning program, course, experiential learning sequence, or learning object at a later point in time, whether in the near-term, mid-term, or far-future. While learners are not thought to fundamentally change in terms of basic biology (at least not in the near- and mid-terms), future learners (in higher education) may be conceptualized as somewhat different from present-day learners based on various changing contextual factors: macro-level socio-cultural developments, subject domains, educational methodologies and practices, technological advances, workforce requirements, and other factors. This work explores some ways to operationalize the exploration of “future learners” in order to enhance the design of teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of understanding “future learners” is in part informed by information theory, which posits that an encoder codes a message, passes the message through a channel, and is received by a decoder of that message. The analogy to teaching and learning is that the encoder is a teacher, and the content being taught is the message, and the learner is the decoder. This approach is a severe and mechanistic oversimplification; however, it does suggest that some level of understanding must exist between the encoder-decoder for the information to be successfully passed (and optimally retained). Theoretically, the understanding of future learners and their learning needs may help the encoder/teacher tailor the learning (the information) for proper receipt by learners. There is a responsibility going the other way, too, with learners bearing a responsibility to acquire the message (but not reverse-profile the teacher). This theory does not suggest a passive receipt of information by a learner.

Profiling future learners seems like an elusive endeavor, but this practice has long been a part of the following: (1) learner-centered teaching and learning, (2) adaptive or customized teaching, (3) instructional design, development, and deployment, among others. One common approach involves a macro-level view of particular generations of learners based on touchpoints in their developmental cycle that may explain their meaning-making and attitudes and life experiences. These can inform what learning content needs to be addressed and how it may be framed for easier understanding. Inclusion in each generation depends on a simple demographic: age. The idea is to understand where learners are and to meet them there, to lessen the shock of the new learning. Designing content properly may minimize “extraneous cognitive load,” so mental processing may be applied to the built-in complexity of the learning (the “intrinsic cognitive load” and the “germane cognitive load” required in the learning task). Generational profiling helps set a baseline for understanding new generations of learners and their differing socialization, differing bodies of knowledge, differing technological sensibilities, and differing expectations for teaching and learning. At more meso levels, there may be profiling of learner values and attitudes based on their personal identification with particular social groups, lifestyles, and their self-expressed

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