Chapter II

Exploring the Tensions in Educational and Instructional Design in Australian Universities

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Abstract

Recent trends in higher education have led to notable impacts upon the profession of educational or instructional design. This chapter presents some of the major challenges faced by the profession and explores the tensions arising when current practices are pushed by the momentum of a quality assurance agenda, technology and flexible learning imperatives, an increasing diversity within our student demographics and the emerging models of educational design practice across national contexts. The chapter also discusses the current status of the profession itself, debates and trends towards professionalisation and accreditation, and the manner in which designers and developers operate as a community of practice.

Introduction

The changing practices of educational designers in higher education have evolved in response to continuing changes in the broad contexts within which they find themselves. However, these changes to the profession have not occurred without tension.

The list of pressures which have had an enormous impact on higher education in the UK, Australia and New Zealand since the 1980s is now familiar: massification, globalisation, technology, economic rationalism, transdisciplinarity and new forms of knowledge. To varying degrees, some or all of these pressures are evident in higher education sectors in the U.S., Europe, Asia, India and Africa. Responses to these pressures vary enormously from country to country, influenced by government policy, funding, GNP, national technology infrastructures, geography, culture, and political and economic alliances between developed and developing countries' education sectors. For individual higher education institutions, responses will depend on a number of factors: the size of the institution, its location (metropolitan or regional), its history and age, the nature and extent of its research quantum, its delivery culture (traditional face-to-face, distance education, dual mode, online), its student population (school leavers, mature-aged, international, offshore), its wealth, and its strategic priorities.

Designers have responded to these pressures by adapting their role, learning new skills, and embracing technology. However, new pressures, not yet fully articulated or debated, are bearing in on the profession. What, for example, is the impact upon designers of the recent trend in the UK, Australia and New Zealand towards institutional performance-based funding, based on identified performance indicators for teaching and learning; and standards frameworks for academic teachers. This broad policy and funding framework, driven by quality assurance and accountability imperatives places the "institutional spotlight" squarely on both meeting and proving certain measurable standards for teaching and learning. Just where designers sit in this picture, both from their own professional perspective and from the perspectives of their institutions, remains to be seen.

For educational designers, questions of how we engage with standards of practice for teaching and learning, and how we find them explicated within our own institutions, are key. Our capacity to reconcile the institutional requirements for both quality enhancement and quality assurance affects our day-to-day focus as well as our professional identity. Do we invest our effort at the macro level of curriculum development and ensure that questions of design are informed at the program level or do we find ourselves concerned with the entire process of learning materials development and multiple modes of delivery?

In this current climate of the "government's managerialist agenda" (Parry & Debowski, 2004, p. 13) in which we see explicit concern with quality, accountability and their associated rewards, how do educational design theories inform current practices? Where data on student satisfaction with teaching, learning and the curriculum is a criterion for government funding, how do the changing profiles of university learners and their increasingly diverse backgrounds impact upon the decisions negotiated with the subject matter expert through the educational design process?

As the sector examines how to create efficiencies and measure and reward improvements in teaching and learning, the approaches to educational design can also be reconsidered. What are the implications of a move away from a systems model of design to a staff development

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