



Chapter I

Using “Blended Learning” to Develop Tertiary Students’ Skills of Critique

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Abstract

Devising pedagogical strategies that will engage students in ways that will assure the development of their skills of critique and analysis presents a challenge to tertiary teachers. This chapter 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 chapter 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; in particular, it presents a discussion of the potential of “blended learning” and “variation theory” for leading such research.

Introduction

Pedagogical approaches 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 and that such engagements ought to be reflect communities of learning (Marton & Trigwell, 2000). We believe this is imperative in undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms, 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 life-long learning and qualifications as one crucial step in assuring career progression; as well as the demands of increasingly sophisticated learners.

Therefore, tertiary education ought to exploit students’ 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 chapter uses a case-based evaluation study of a curriculum unit¹ to raise broader issues related to the design of online learning environments, the potential of social presence in such environments and innovative assessment to influence successful learning outcomes. As a case study, it provides “an evidentiary boundary around which to discuss educational problems” (Walker, 2001, p. 10). In this case, the educational problem concerned engaging students in forms of discourse in an online environment to develop their skills of critique, analysis and decision making.

The Study Focus

In previous years, students in this particular unit (a postgraduate unit concerned with financial computation and investment decision-making²) claimed that they

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