

Transformation in the Online Age

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Constructivism is alive and well online in the postmodern age. Never before have so many gained access to higher education without the traditional barriers or confinements in learning. Enrollments at the top accredited online colleges and universities now rival the more established ground-based institutions (Leu, Leu & Coiro, 2004; Roblyer, 2004). With all the change that has taken place over the last decade in higher education involving distributed learning models, it is no wonder so many non-traditional learners are now revisiting opportunities they once perceived beyond their reach. With this mass infusion of new learners comes new challenges and experiences.

Fairly recent research into learning styles has provided online instructors with a different set of tools with which to help build effective online communities of learning (Lamb, 2002). This work expands on Knowles' (1980) notions of andragogy, and takes on new meaning as we further evolve in this new age of education:

- Adults have a wealth of lifetime experiences that should be used as a resource in learning. Prior learning in this non-traditional group has a heavy influence on how they interact in this environment.
- Adult students need to have verification as to why they are learning something. They need to be told how it impacts their lives.
- Adults better adapt to the problem-based learning (PBL) approach. Directed learning models and methods should be limited as much as possible.
- Adults want to put to use newly acquired skills as soon as possible.

With these guides available to us in our virtual classrooms, it becomes important for the traditional model of "all knowing professor" to be set aside for one of facilitator of knowledge, coach and guide. A welcome change for many, I suspect. No longer does the dogma of the Middle Ages restrict our views of learning as something exchanged between the all knowing and the passive receiver of knowledge. Constructivist approaches to management, research and learning are fast becoming the norm for the modern institution (Harvey, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This takes on new meaning for the adult learner seeking an e-graduate level experience.

As we move from classrooms that are content-centered to learner-centered we find a new energy and the need to adjust to the diversity of learning styles presented. Not just a basic understanding of individual differences, but a deeper ability to adjust the course design and delivery to better address the divergent needs of the co-participants in this educational experience (Gorski, 2000; Silver, Strong & Perini, 2000).

This appears to be our greatest challenge in the paradigm many faculty have now selected to participate in as facilitators (online professorate). The question seems to be how best to support this and let go of the comfort zone that objectivist teaching methods hold for many of us. Personally, I feel this move is a good one,

as it pushes us to continue our growth as professionals through participation in this process. Many ethical questions are being addressed and new instructional designs are helping to continuously improve the distributed learning model. Coming up with non-traditional PBL activities that engage learners are one way to discourage problems like plagiarism or other unethical academic praxis which seem to plague this learning environment.

Certainly many challenges are still ahead in this age of change, but remaining flexible and open-minded are the best methods I know in dealing with this transformation in knowledge work. Happy journey!

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