FROM THE DESK OF ...

Online teaching: Moving from good to great

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Learner engagement is what good teachers strive to achieve. Online teaching presents an opportunity for the good teacher teaching in the traditional classroom setting to construct an engaging learner-centred online environment for learners to be actively participating in *their* learning. To do this, the teacher must understand the online environment.

From the higher education perspective, 'adapt, adopt and scale' has too often become the mantra of universities desirous of competing with the for-profit online universities around the world. What is meant by this: take a specific course taught in real time and 'adapt' it to an online format that can be ubiquitously taught by any faculty member as it is 'adopted' as a model course not to be changed (teacher proof), thereby enabling the course to be 'scaled' to a worldwide student audience that reaches hundreds, if not thousands of students asynchronously. So what implications does this have for a country's premier university with top research scientists and a tradition of high-quality classroom teaching?

One of the major points of resistance to online classes is one of saying that the 'art' of teaching is lost in the digital world and that the material presented in cyberspace is mostly just information, or content transferred online. Too often, online classes have become the presentation of multiple Power Point slides that are just as ineffective in person as they are online. Adding assignments, tests and/or case studies to complete the class do little to enhance the online experience for the teacher or the learner.

A useful definition of teaching is that it is the interaction of content knowledge, pedagogy and the interpersonal skills of the instructor (Brown, 1978). In this regard, *effective* teaching occurs when each of these components is maximised (Papa, 2011a). Good, in fact, great teaching, whether online or live, is remarkably similar. The university's role might be transitioning faculty from *live* on the stage to *live* in cyberspace.

The first aspect of teaching is content. Content mastery is key, but not sufficient for high-quality teaching. It is a given that advanced education in a field (typically, the doctorate in universities) is the *sine qua non* for university teaching. But, let's be clear, presenting information is *not* teaching and receiving

information is *not* learning. With so much information online, accessing content is not an issue. Rather, it is more important to curate the information that is available. Take for example a major source of online content, the Khan Academy (2012). The Khan Academy is a video library of over 3,400 topics and claims over 10 million viewers to date. It is online information presented in such a way as to provide visual and auditory, as well as factual information. The topics covered include mathematics, science, computer science, finance and economics, humanities and test preparation (including 20 videos on grade 3 Singapore mathematics). Clips featured in the Khan Academy are not particularly sophisticated, comprising a visual of writing on a blackboard, accompanied by a voice-over. The Academy has been touted as a world-class education for anyone anywhere. Mr. Khan, whose voice is heard on more than 3,000 of the videos, has been described as the world's first superstar teacher (Noer, 2012). Clearly, the Academy seeks to provide an effective alternative to reading a textbook. But, it is not necessarily an example of effective teaching as much an example of 'adopt, adapt and scale'. The impact is clear from the number of users that are noted in many news reports in the US (just google Khan Academy). What is not clear at this time is how effective it is in engaging the learner.

The second aspect is pedagogy. This can be loosely defined as the translation of information into knowledge that is understandable and that ensures engagement of the learner. It encompasses the development of learning objectives that are measurable, the presentation of content in ways that engage the learner and the assessment of what has been learned. To do this effectively in an online setting, one must have a clear understanding of how adults learn and their learning styles, that is, whether these are auditory, visual, kinesthetic, or a mixture of these three (Papa & Papa, 2012). These learning styles should be acknowledged in how the online classroom is constructed with assignments and activities. The adult kinesthetic learner will excel better with an assignment that requires him/her to do some field research or hands-on activity; for the auditory learner, the online teacher would ensure that 'chat' opportunities were part of the online classroom environment perhaps as part of group work assignments. The visual learner needs readings translated into visuals to enhance their learning. It is most likely that online instructors will not know the learning styles of their students. But, what the online teacher should know is how to offer multiple strategies to reach all the learners in their online environment.

One must present the information to be learned in understandable constructivist chunks of content. By this, we mean that simply adapting all of the content and moving it onto the online environment does not work. What does work for the online instructor is understanding how the primary concepts, content, of what the instructor is teaching is 'chunked' into knowledge strategies that encourage

active learner engagement. Online teaching allows for many of the strategies we have learned to be successfully used in real-time classrooms: group work, peer-to-peer interactions, and field experiences. Translating these classroom strategies into online activities will ensure learner engagement.

Activities must be prepared to engage the students. Good teaching by effective teachers relates the information in content chunks that are understood not simply at the information/fact level (knowledge, comprehension and application) but at the higher levels of understanding [e.g. analysis, synthesis and evaluation (see Bloom's Taxonomy)]. Even if the material is appropriate and well developed and, even if it is presented appropriately, learner engagement from the teacher's perspective leads to assessment that must be commensurate.

Finally, interpersonal skills of the teacher reveal themselves in areas such as the quality of the feedback, engagement of the individuals in thoughtful, civil discourse of the material, openness to questions and different ways of presentation, that ensure learning by all. Online instructors wanting to optimise learning in their online classroom will need to learn to use the tools that create collaboration and community among the students. Community among the students leads to peer-to-peer learning and requires the instructor to understand social presence for the learners; that is, how online learning engages all learners including the instructor. If you move about in your classroom teaching, consider how you move about in cyber space. How will the students ask questions if you cannot see their hands or questioning expressions? If you work in the *real* classroom, smiling and nodding gestures need to be translated in the digital classroom. Centres for teaching and learning will need to continue to work on the components of good teaching, as much as focus on the bells and whistles of the technology that will be part of the educational landscape.

Teaching online requires faculty to attain new teaching skills to ensure that the course is not a digital correspondence course, with students reading an assignment, entering comments on the discussion board and then receiving a grade for it. Additionally, Web 2.0 classes, which do not use protected online course software that is password protected, require the teacher to fully grasp the open access digital tools and the knowledge to encourage learning through social presence in a greater social context (iGoogle, blogs, wikis, etc.) where learners collaborate with the instructor and their peers to gain knowledge. The primary goal in online teaching and learning is in knowing the adult learner student and having the digital tools and skills to create communities of practice and inquiry (Papa, 2011a; Papa, 2011b).

From constructivism which allows the teacher to construct the digital classroom to the connectivism of professional learning communities, the skills of the teacher at the university are being challenged to deliver their disciplinary content in a networked learning environment that values the connections of the learners to the teacher, to each other, and for the reflection by the uniqueness of the individual learner. Developing social presence for the online learner makes the environment seem *real* and this is the goal for great online teaching and learning [and for that matter, for greater teaching and learning in general].

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