

Reflections on Three Questions I am Trying to Answer

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The Background Giving Rise to My Questions

The questions I posed—(a) *Can assumptions about self, authority, and knowledge develop so that online learners can come to see and know themselves as knowledge constructors;* (b) *Are we ready to facilitate learning for gamers and learners from diverse cultures and backgrounds;* (c) *Are we preparing learners for creative global collaboration*—grow out of a sincere concern to address one question frequently posed about learning at a distance: Can distance education really provide a quality learning experience? The question bothers me for many reasons but mainly because I fear it possibly reflects a deeply ingrained societal belief that learning can only occur when the teacher and students are gathered together. Holding that belief suggests that any learning occurring outside of that configuration is, by definition, an inferior learning situation. Besides slighting the field of distance learning, its designers, and instructors, this attitude carries with it derision for the learners who take advantage of the ability to learn at a distance and the quality of the education they receive and can apply.

Abiding by the belief—be it pervasive or not—that distance education is not as good as face-to-face learning places many learners at a disadvantage, eliminates learning opportunities for others, and robs our world of the contributions made by those whose only chance to learn comes at a distance. The most viable method to terminate that belief of distance education as an inferior way to learn is to continue to improve the quality of

the learning experience at a distance. For those reasons, I ask how do we make distance education better correspond with the way people learn; how do we make distance education a quality experience. The answers, in part, require that distance education design moves beyond single-sensory, autonomous learning through reading text-based lecture notes and taking online quizzes. I am searching ways to design learning at a distance that feels compatible with the way we *really* learn in a multisensory world, moving away from the computer for some of the learning activities, sometimes learning together, sometimes learning alone.

Trying to Educate Myself out of My Experience

To find answers to my search, I'm trying to educate myself out of my experiences—the way I have been taught as well as the way I have been taught to teach, usually using two senses—hearing and seeing. I'm seeking ways to facilitate multi-sensory learning, experiential learning that can lead to transformational learning at a distance. I'm trying to match media, technologies, interaction, and learning activities with the attributes of today's learners entering universities and to facilitate Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle at a distance. And for now, I'm seeking these answers without a budget for developing virtual environments or computer games.

Why seek multi-sensory experiences at a distance? The mind ultimately is not and of itself real; it is made of up of different experiences stimulated by different phenomena (The Dalai Lama, 2001). Our learning experiences, our relationships, our quality of life, and our identity depend, in part, on both what we do, whom we gather with, and how we experience what we do. Our actions and our perceptions are linked

through real-world objects and experiences that afford a range of certain possibilities. Learning is experiencing some of the potential possibilities in the world in new ways, situating the meaning of words, images, symbols, and artifacts, forming new associations and patterns of thought, and forming new affiliations with other people (Gee, 2003). Since our mind is a parallel ensemble of physiological operations linking the muscular, endocrine, immune, and nervous systems, it performs several activities at once, engaging our whole being with movement, feelings, and perceptions (Bownds, 1999). This ensemble informs our actions; our actions reciprocally change the environment for others. These ongoing environmental changes affect our actions in a pattern of learning with characteristics common of dynamic systems (Yan & Fisher, 2002). Thinking is the activity of deciding what movement to make next in a given environment with a group of people and tools. Consequently, thoughts separate from mind, body, and experience have no relevance to learners.

However, *doing* is not the end all and be all. Doing could merely be an automatic reaction to a stimulus perceived as pain or pleasure. The *doing* that higher education seeks to stimulate is an embodied experience in harmony with what the learner feels, wishes, and thinks, accompanied by the learner's search for meaning of the experience. When learners reach that harmony, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would say there is *flow*. When the learner realizes that the meaning he or she takes away from a setting is but one of many possibilities and cares about the effect of his or her *doing* on others residing on the opposite side of the world, there is *significant* learning (Fink, 2003), the beginning of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Today I'm seeking how to facilitate flow and significant, engaged, transformational learning at a distance. It is suggested that flow and engaged learning do not happen at the will of the instructor or designer or even the learner. Flow and engaged learning happen when learning activities provide a balance between high challenge and high skills and allow the learner to focus on clear goals and receive immediate feedback (Fink, 2003). Flow and engaged learning happen when learners commit themselves fully to learning in terms of time, effort, and active participation (Gee, 2003). They happen when learners are willing to see themselves as the kind of culturally sensitive person who can learn, use, and value the learning experience offered, integrating insights gained from multicultural experiences.

The literature suggests that yesterday's generations of learners dutifully participated in learning activities with little if any questioning why. Today's generations of learners, who frequently grew up playing video and computer games, enter our institutions of higher education bringing a different identity and thought process. The video and computer games they have played while growing up and continue to play today have changed their identity. That identity and its attributes may be the source of additional ideas on how to design engaging distance education environments. This new generation comes to the university as active problem solvers who consult friends and classmates, seek resources and information, try out solutions, persist in trying to solve a problem even after making mistakes, and do not consider mistakes as errors but as opportunities for reflection and further learning (Gee, 2003; Beck & Wade, 2004). They see themselves as people who learn to experience the world in new ways and gain the potential to join and collaborate with a new affinity group, and develop resources for

future learning and problem solving (Gee, 2003). They learn by trial and error; they operate with less structure.

Learning, therefore, does not just affect what a learner knows; it can transform how the learner understands the nature of knowing. While past generations of learners may have been, in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) terms, received or subjective knowers, today's learners are more likely to be procedural knowers and independent, critical, creative thinkers who do not just progress sequentially toward competence. Our learners who do come to us as received or subjective knowers need to move toward seeing themselves as independent thinkers and knowers. All learners progress along a complex web of connections, varying with their experiences, culture, range of variation in level, and kind of pathway shown and followed (Yan & Fischer, 2002) as well as their identity as a learner.

To facilitate engaged learners in a balance of high competence and high skill, learners need to not only learn about the domain but also about themselves and their current and potential capacities. They must learn how to engage in new action—intellectual, social or physical—and in new ways of thinking—critical, creative, or practical (Fink, 2003). They must learn how to self-assess and monitor, so they can continue the learning, enable the flow, and collaborate with others globally. The distance education environment then needs to provide the opportunity for learners to repeatedly meet learners from other cultures, practice, try out, take risks in a place where real-world consequences are lowered, and reflect. Learners cannot learn deeply by being told things outside the context of embodied experiences (Gee, 2003).

Learning builds on previous learning experiences and knowledge; each learner's experience will be different as each learner is working from a different set of motivations, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts based on previous experiences. Therefore, the distance education instructor is not teaching a class; she is teaching individual students (Bain, 2004). The students are not following a uniform learning path headed sequentially toward competence. Learning is not linear but filled with stops and starts, reversals and breakthroughs, success and positive emotions, failures, negative emotions, varying degrees of scaffolding required, and uncontrolled differences in social interaction and task requirements (Yan & Fischer, 2002). Each student takes a different pathway from novice to expert, from received knower to creative, constructed knower. Each pathway includes differing number of steps, levels of complexity, sequence of performances, degree and type of social interaction, and time to complete the task. Each student manifests his or her own unique unfolding course of activity, and through reflective abstraction on those experiences; each learner makes judgments about what has happened. New understanding is constructed from the integration of the new with prior, existing knowledge. Such application and generalization are difficult to attain without the time to experience and process the experience (Gee, 2003). Therefore, we need to fully immerse the learners in experiences while trying to eliminate their fear of making a poor grade while generating a hypothesis, testing out a new idea, and maintaining a highly challenging environment. Learners need to actively process—design an experience, consolidate, internalize, and test.

While I have been pondering these questions, I have been seeking answers through the literature and using the possibilities I find in the literature to design my

distance education courses. I have been using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Kolb's learning cycle is based as its name suggests on the learner's experiences. Briefly summarized, Kolb's learning cycle can be described as follows. The learner has a concrete experience of some type. That experience becomes integrated with previous experience through learner reflection. The learner generates a new abstract idea or hypothesis after his or her previous experience is reorganized to accommodate or assimilate the new experience; the learner then devises a plan for testing the new idea. The new idea is tested through yet another concrete experience.

As a distance education designer and instructor, I have been trying to solve the problem of making distance education a quality learning experience. I have been trying to match distance education media, technology, and learning activity to stimulate each phase of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle as suggested by Zull (2002). I have been trying to determine when the learners need to come together to stimulate learning and when they need to work independently. I have initially assigned synchronous voice discussions as one way of testing out new ideas and asynchronous text-based private journals for the reflection/integration stage . . . based on how I reflect and integrate through thinking and writing alone. After first implementing this design, I asked for feedback. The first comment I received from a learner was *I reflect and integrate aloud when participating in class discussions and feel stifled having to reflect alone through a private journal.* Now I am back to the drawing board . . . after testing out my new hypothesis and getting feedback. My recent experience, however, renews my interest in using problems and Kolb's experiential learning cycle to stimulate significant, engaged, caring learning through *experience*.

Conclusion

I hope distance education can overcome the stigma that some people still hold. I hope that we can reduce the uncertainty about learning at a distance that society, perspective students and parents, and employers may hold. I hope that we will soon hear that many view the distance education environment as a place where significant, engaged, transformational learning occurs, where personal connections with other learners across the globe are made, and those experiences with others develop caring, culturally sensitive global learners. I hope those experiences are the start of learners' identities as people who are highly motivated to work creatively and collaboratively at a global level.

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