

Experiential education: beyond the classroom

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Integrating teaching, learning and assessment through the connection between domain knowledge base teachings with learning theories is applied in an undergraduate research study tour.

The ongoing process of developing and improving the area of teaching, learning and assessment for universities is towards a healthy sustainable fostering of teaching and learning environments that enrich students and staff with meaningful experiences (Boyer, 1987). This paper uses a recent undergraduate research study tour program (REC: Research, Experience & Capture) to Malaysia; to discuss the significance of this specific teaching and learning method/environment. The discussion focuses on the sub theme of this conference: integrating learning, teaching and assessment, to enhance student learning. The REC undergraduate research study tour program recognised the importance of identifying teaching and learning as two very distinct areas of focus that required a particular level of detail with very specific needs to be identified and addressed. Therefore the design of the REC program identified:

- 1. Teaching: using Porth's three phrase model for designing and teaching study tour*
- 2. Learning: applied learning theories (ways people learn)*
- 3. Assessment: evaluating creativity in a research framework*

The concept of the experiential education beyond the classroom is an invaluable teaching method and more importantly, this method provides a learning environment that fosters the galvanising of theory and practice. The learning experiences extend the theoretical framework being established in the classroom and knowledge (theories) is seen and applied in a physical context. Knowledge (theory) is seen and applied, learning is direct, and feedback is customised

Introduction

The teaching of discourse in any discipline at a university level will consist of a theoretical framework, upon which an intertwining network of discourses shape the critical learning space for students. A learning space should not be limited to the acquisition of knowledge and skills but encourage and provide an experiential learning space and extend the intellectual content of the classroom. A dynamic experiential learning space such as *study tour programs* offers students the opportunity to read and observe theory being applied in practice within a specific and unique social and cultural context.

This paper discusses a study tour program [REC: Research, Experience & Capture] developed as an undergraduate research unit in the Faculty of Built Environment, Art and Design at Curtin University of Technology. The paper examines the way the structure of the REC study tour unit was designed to integrate teaching, learning and assessment to enhance student learning; a process which linked three learning theories (ways of learning) with Porth's three phrase (pre-tour, on-tour and post-tour) model for the designing and teaching of the REC study tour program.

The first section of this paper discusses the establishment of the theoretical framework, of thinking, and the defining processes, by which knowledge underpins teaching and learning. The REC undergraduate research study tour program, which ran in 2006, will be used as a case study to illustrate initiatives implemented in the study tour with respect to the way teaching, learning and assessments were integrated to enhance student learning.

Background

This section presents the theoretical framework structuring the process in the integration of teaching, learning and assessment by firstly, examining the definitions of teaching and learning linked by the servicing of knowledge. Secondly, knowledge is the corner stone of teaching and learning, and it is therefore a necessity to present a definition for what constitutes knowledge.

Teaching & Learning Environment

The quest for effective teaching and learning environments is integral to the education process. With this in mind, the REC program was designed with the following awareness:

- That the manner, methods or style of teaching derives from an individual's teaching philosophy. Conscious or passive educators promote a certain teaching and learning ethos: one's value/attitude on the field/discipline, believing and adopting teaching methods and identifying *effective ways of learning*. The link between knowledge and the delivery of knowledge, which are two very distinct processes, is of utmost importance no matter what field, area or discipline one teaches in. For example, to have a wealth of knowledge does not mean that someone can teach that knowledge effectively. It does however provide the person with the potential to offer that wealth of knowledge. However, to effectively deliver that knowledge requires that person to identify the most effective way that knowledge is learnt and retained.
- That the integration of teaching and learning is a union of knowledge and skills: firstly, what is taught and secondly, how it is learnt through the understanding of the ways people learn; *The key to reflecting on the way we teach is to base our thinking on what we know about how students learn* (Biggs, 1999).
- What is taught, the body of knowledge, is informed by the field or discipline or often referred to as *domain knowledge*, but what tends to be a missed opportunity is the lack of the realisation *that ways of learning* are also an intrinsic part of the binding process that links teaching and learning.
- The discourses and theories on learning (*ways people learn*) have identified a range of models or modes of learning. The establishment of these models of learning position themselves within the three pillars of education: the teaching, the learning and the environment(s) of teaching and learning. It is important therefore to recognise that in most situations not all modes or models of learning will fit the *domain knowledge* being delivered. Therefore, the adoption of the modes of learning must consider which is most effective. An integration of teaching and learning that is strategically positioned with the understanding of ways people learn establishes greater connection between knowledge learnt, knowledge retained and knowledge applied.

What Constitutes Knowledge?

Knowledge is one of the fundamental foundations upon which teaching and learning is built. What constitutes knowledge? And where is knowledge accessed? These are two core questions in aiding the process of connecting knowledge with learning; a process which needs to occur if there are to be greater opportunities for the production of innovation and creativity.

- **Knowledge is Currency**
Knowledge, in the university environment, is its form of currency in which there is a constant exchange of currency occurring and the currency exchanges across *domains* depend heavily on the connectivity in activating common threads or areas. There is a constant need for an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge access and application in teaching and learning.
- **Sources of Knowledge**
Bodies of knowledge exist on two main levels for a learner, knowledge that exists within a specific *domain* and knowledge that is informed and shaped by the broader context of society. Knowledge finds itself transforming and being transferred at all levels and across different contextualised learning communities. Gabelnick et al. (1990) propose that learning communities are chiefly curricular structures within institutions that link different disciplines and subject areas around shared themes or questions.

...purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together course or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. (Gabelnick et al. 1990:5)

Essentially a lack of access to integration of knowledge from knowledge community networks can bring about a ‘dis-integration’. Isolating domain knowledge and compartmentalising it into independent disciplines de-contextualises the source of knowledge.

▪ **Innovation/creativity (where knowledge connects with learning)**

Innovation/creativity is acknowledged as contributing to the existing body of *domain* knowledge. New knowledge does not need to be original or all encompassing as all new knowledge is transient and highly contextualised. An outcome to one problem may not provide a remedy for the same problem within another context; a transferral of knowledge which Vygotsky’s social learning theory conceptualises that the *domains* of learning need to be parts of a whole (Vygotsky, 1978).

Study Tour - Learning Beyond the Classroom

The application of the *study tour* as an experiential education/learning tool in the discipline of Architecture is not a new phenomenon. The mode of learning through experiencing and seeing dates back to the grand tours of the 17th and 18th centuries and involved aspiring architects/apprentices who would travel to cities that were renowned for their great architecture, such as Rome, Paris and Florence. The men would spend several years gaining a wealth of knowledge through the experiences of seeing, recording and capturing. The lessons learnt were taken back and contextualised and the transfer of new-found knowledge and inspiration began to immerge.

During the 20th century the concept of the grand tour expanded from an opportunity to see and learn to an opportunity for internationalise discourse in architecture. Influential architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Charles and Ray Eames, Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn and many others saw the importance of adopting the mode of experiential learning through “*touring*” and this had a profound impact on their architectural knowledge and generated a learning and teaching ethos, that has shaped the discourse of theory and practice for the architecture profession.

It is widely accepted that learning through ‘first-hand experience’ (going onsite, seeing the real world and learning through travel) is the best form of teaching to demonstrate direct application of knowledge (theory). Seeing it is believing its (knowledge) importance and worth by witnessing evidence of the application of knowledge or theory to practice. Students have a greater appreciation as a result of being able to identify with and extend/build on concepts/theories introduced within the confines of the classroom.

This paper is in no way advocating that classroom learning is limiting to student learning or staff teaching. The paper uses the example of the REC study tour as an avenue to discuss and to illustrate how the REC study tour has considered the integration of teaching, learning and assessment as a direct outcome of the learning and teaching opportunities offered through the incorporation of experiential learning gained through learning beyond the classroom.

The Principles behind the REC Study Tour (experiential learning beyond the classroom)

This section looks at the vital constituents of a study tour unit and entails careful consideration of two core areas:

1. Teaching focused which looks at applying Porth’s three phrase model (pre-tour, on-tour and post-tour) of designing study tours and considers the integration of elements below:
 - Identifying the knowledge and skill (teaching material/focus areas);
 - Providing the most effective teaching condition/environment (learning theories);
 - Applying an appropriate style of teaching;
 - Recognising the learning outcomes (core and substantial); and
 - Informed and accountable feedback and evaluation (progressive)

2. Learning focused which looks at three specific learning theories i) inquiry, ii) constructivism and iii) experiential as a method of:
 - Identifying a methodology of teaching that is framed by these three specific ways of learning, which empowers the concept of learning beyond the classroom.
3. Built into the teaching and learning; assessment, evaluation and feedback:
 - Self-directed learning (SDL);
 - Peer review;
 - Mentor evaluation.

Teaching focused for REC [Research, Experience & Capture]

Porth's (1997), three phrase model (pre-tour, on-tour and post-tour) provides a very clear method to structure the learning outcomes through preparation, participation and consolidation/reflection.

Pre-tour [Research]

The general lack of knowledge of Malaysia, in both the domain and societal context, meant that we had to provide students with clear direction prior to the tour. Students were gathered for one pre-departure meeting and one intense research workshop (including postgraduates and honours students assisting with mentoring) in which they were introduced to the aims and objectives of a research study tour. A specifically designed journal, issued to all students, included vital information about the trip –travel advice, research methods/strategies/framework and Malaysian history.

Peer or group mentoring and individual ownership of the research were discussed and encouraged. Three pre-tour tasks were assigned to the students: first, familiarise themselves with the country's history, geography, culture and architecture; second, determine an interest area (research question) to investigate while on tour; and third, to produce a research paper with a strong theoretical position. These tasks could be performed as a group or individually.

In the second meeting, a research workshop, students were asked to fine tune their area of research by clearly defining the extent of the research scope. Presentations and critiques of the students' research proposals by postgraduates, honours students and staff played a vital role in clarifying and ironing out problems before leaving for Malaysia.

It was in these meetings that students were introduced to the two significant events that would occur during the tour: a research development workshop to be held at the Limkokwing University College of Technology (LUCT) and a final presentation dinner to showcase the fruits of their study tour in Kuala Lumpur.

On-tour [Experience]

Porth (1997) suggests that structure and process are the keys to maintaining a learning experience in an on-site, learning beyond the classroom, phase of a study tour. From the beginning, the learning atmosphere of the study tour needed to be relaxed and informal. It was important that the students felt that staff were accessible and approachable as the role of staff on the study tour was more facilitation than teaching. The program was organised to value a balance between structured time allocations, contact with staff and 'free' time. This balance was achieved through the creation of an informal routine. Meal times, site visits, time on the tour bus were opportunities for students to meet with staff or their peer mentors. In between site visits, students were encouraged to explore, engage with the people and absorb the atmosphere of the town or city we were in. No site visits or formal activities were scheduled after dinner but students could arrange to see staff if needed. Often these meetings were informal and impromptu which helped to break down communication barriers and create a good rapport between students and staff.

Undoubtedly, academic reflection is an essential part of learning. In architecture and interior architecture education, it is also an important tool for establishing an architectural position. Therefore, it was important that the students were engaged in a process of recording and reflection inherent in maintaining a student journal. In the context of the REC study tour, students were asked to use their journals to visually record their experiences. Though not a requirement, the students were encouraged to take the journals as an opportunity to further develop their own individual recording skills. Most students began their journals experimenting with different recording methods. However, we found that

towards the end of the period, many had found a personal forte, such as photography or sketching, and had further developed that skill.

Using the entries and recordings in their student journals, a research paper was produced. This exercise continued the student's academic reflection through the process of editing and refining the paper that they had drafted in order to formalise and assemble it into a clear and accurate synthesis of observations within the theoretical framework. The mode of visual presentations is such that the facets of research undertaken by the student were presented in a variety of visually engaging forms such as mapping, sketching or diagrams. Many students found this exercise of recording in a journal and producing the research paper very helpful, particularly because the study tour took them on a fifteen-day journey through two major urban centres in Malaysia. The journal was a quick way of recording a scene or documenting feelings, thoughts and experiences that would not have been captured with a camera.

Post-tour [Capture]

According to Porth's (1997) model, the last phase of the study tour should help integrate and reinforce the experiences of the study tour. In light of that, a series of informal presentations were organised at which the students were able to share their experiences through informal floor talks with other staff members and students who did not participate in the study tour. Through these conversations, the students were able to recall their journey and re-evaluate the knowledge they had gathered during the study tour. This post-tour presentation provided an opportunity for both staff and students to witness the learning and personal growth of each student through their journals and papers. After the presentations, the students commented that they were astonished at the amount of knowledge they had gathered along the way. Some were even amazed at their own development and the maturing of their recording skills when looking back through their journals.

Learning focused (three specific learning theories)

Having identified Porth's (1997) model for the structure of teaching the REC study tour, three approaches were recognised as being significant in supporting the three phrase learning model. This included inquiry, constructivism and experiential learning.

Inquiry is problem based learning where a problem or question is presented and students are encouraged to explore to build up familiarity towards understanding of the concept[s]. This way of learning is energised by curiosity, allowing students to build on ideas and interests which further expand the original curriculum.

Constructivism is a philosophy of learning built on the premise that through reflecting on one's experiences, one is able to construct a personal understanding of the concept[s] in the world one is surrounded by. Learning is a search for meaning and meaning centres on an understanding of the whole as well as the parts and that the parts must be understood in the context of the whole. In other words, learning focuses on the primary concept and not a stringing together of isolated facts. This way of learning endorses the need for hands-on problem solving.

This philosophy of learning recommends not having a standardised grading system or means of measuring success or achievements conventionally. Instead, it is proposed that students develop greater ownership and accountability for their learning so that the emphasis shifts to students evaluating their own progress.

Constructivism sees the educator as a facilitator who establishes facts to foster new ways of thinking and applying in developing understanding. Students tend to be more receptive to analysis, interpretation and forecasting of information.

Experiential learning finds its roots in experience where learning stems from active participation 'by doing' or 'carryout/acting out' the concepts or ideas being taught.

The above three philosophies of learning shaped how the REC study tour learning methods were structured. Most importantly, it established how evaluation, feedback and assessment were to be integrated. Hildebrand (1996) stated that, 'assessment is frequently the engine that drives pedagogy and the curriculum'.

Essentially, if there is an awareness and consideration of the ways students will learn under specific learning conditions then the measure of success needs to be framed around an appraisal of students' ability to command and demonstrate competency in the taught knowledge (gained) to the creative or new knowledge established (developed). A key to students' ability to connect with new knowledge is their own assessment of how much they understand. Stiggins (2001) writes that in order to enhance student learning, students must be actively involved in their own assessment.

Conclusion

The REC undergraduate study tour program provided an environment of learning beyond the classroom with a carefully orchestrated integration of teaching, learning and assessment. What is quite evident is the need for teachers and facilitators of learning in all fields to be acknowledge and recognise the importance that: *domain* knowledge needs to connect with the wider context to have a greater impact; that learning and learning outcomes exist in carefully articulated stages (Porth, 1997); that learning connects back to the ways students learn (learning theories); and that assessment methodology is an integrated seamless thread in teaching and learning.

The REC program has been able to pilot a teaching and learning program that has identified areas of significance to be considered when developing an integrated teaching, learning and assessment unit.

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