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1998

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, David, Flexible delivery and handing out lecture notes, *Overview - University of Wollongong Teaching & Learning Journal*, 5(1), 1998, 32-34.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/overview/vol5/iss1/10>

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Abstract

It may seem a little strange for me to be writing about Flexible Delivery and printed material! If it does seem strange, that's unfortunate, since such a response reflects an unfortunate understanding of Flexible Delivery. It seems to me that Flexible Delivery (and the related concept, Flexible Learning) tends to be seen as equivalent to distance education and the backwash from that, the substitution of 'ed. tech.' for traditional forms of classroom teaching. I don't want to say that this is a mistake, exactly; it's how the term is used. But I do want to object to the way this understanding influences the motivation for and adoption of Flexible Delivery.

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Why flexible delivery?

It may seem a little strange for me to be writing about Flexible Delivery and printed material! If it does seem strange, that's unfortunate, since such a response reflects an unfortunate understanding of Flexible Delivery. It seems to me that Flexible Delivery (and the related concept, Flexible Learning) tends to be seen as equivalent to distance education and the backwash from that, the substitution of 'ed. tech.' for traditional forms of classroom teaching. I don't want to say that this is a mistake, exactly; it's how the term is used. But I do want to object to the way this understanding influences the motivation for and adoption of Flexible Delivery.

I want to begin by asserting a conception of Flexible Delivery which arises out of pedagogical concerns, concerns regarding the quality of teaching and learning, concerns that may relate to teaching and learning in general, or to specific contexts. Let me be clear that I fully accept that web-based resources, video-conferencing, email discussion-groups, and all the rest may have a role to play regarding such concerns. But I do want to encourage two ideas: that our adoption of flexible delivery methods in our teaching should be motivated by pedagogical concerns; and that we do not limit our understanding of Flexible Delivery to the adoption of ed. tech. along the lines of the list I've just given.

Why would someone who is interested in the quality of teaching and learning be interested in flexible delivery?

They'd be interested because, although 'delivery' is an unfortunate term, the expression helps articulate the idea that how we best teach is not something that is always the same for all situations. With different subjects, with different teaching environments, with different students, with different possibilities for access and contact . . . with different teachers, what works best will vary. We teach best when we are sensitive to this variability: when, for example, we don't assume that the approaches which enabled us to learn best work best for all our students, or that the approach which is engaging almost the whole class is engaging that student in the corner. So, we should introduce flexibility into our teaching practices

How does the use of lecture handouts contribute to flexible delivery?

If we also adopt a broader understanding of Flexible Delivery, then the use of something as prosaic and potentially low-tech, as lecture handouts can be seen as a flexible delivery strategy. I'll explain by describing what I do, and why.

I introduced lecture handouts to my lecturing in first year Philosophy and in first year Communication and Cultural Studies. These involve lecture groups ranging (roughly) from 50 to 110. I had two initial reasons:

I kept finding in tutorials that we could not effectively discuss the issues raised in the lecture because students' notes tended to be quite inaccurate. One can, of course, say that the ability to take accurate lecture notes is one of the skills of a successful student, and if they can't do it, tough luck. But I don't agree with that (who's to say that they couldn't take accurate notes because my lectures are so confusing?; it is really, or rightly, a necessary condition for doing philosophy?). And in any case, nothing changes with the tutorial. So I thought that if I gave out an outline of the lecture, and a summary of the main points and distinctions we might stand a better chance in the tutorials (and I also resolved to ensure that my lectures had a clear structure). This, then, is a move towards flexibility: not assuming that all students find my presentation style easy to follow.

My second initial motivation was that I wanted to make my lectures more interactive, so that the students were actually engaged in the lecture – thinking about the issues, telling me when they felt confused or thought that I was wrong, developing the skills to argue constructively. And I realised that at least one impediment to this was that most of the time they were just making notes (and getting them wrong!). I thought, therefore, that a handout would help here as well.

The system

Without going into the development process, I'll describe the system I now use. I arrived at this after making a lot of use of informal questionnaires. The questionnaires alerted me to problems with what I was doing, but also drew attention to unforeseen benefits.

I use Powerpoint slides, and no written-out lecture, if possible. I print my slides, and hand these out at the beginning of the lecture. I restrict myself to 12 slides (making sure that each of those slides works as a slide – with not too much written on it). I print these 6-to-a-side, and copy them double-sided. I aim to put on the slides the main points of the lecture – what, were they making their own notes, I would hope that every student had taken from the lecture. After the lecture, I make extra copies of the lecture notes available outside the Program Office. That's it!

What are the benefits?

- (a) By using the slides I'm able to speak to the slides (rather than read off from a script). The slide becomes the shared focus of attention, and I tend to move around more. All this improves the situation in the lecture theatre. There's more chance of a conversation going on. (I know that some people hate Powerpoint, but that's not my topic so I'll say no more about it. The same benefits come from OHPs.)
- (b) If not using Powerpoint or OHPs, the notes by themselves bring about these benefits, I've found. I make it that this is the basic text that we are discussing. Naturally I expand on the notes, but when the students have the notes they know that they constitute the central aspect of the lecture. (In feedback, students have said that without the notes they sometimes find it hard to distinguish between the main points, explanatory points, and asides.) The handouts are also very convenient when the technology breaks down.

2. Not all students like slides. Some have difficulty seeing them; some simply prefer to have the material in front of them and write comments on the sheet. The handouts introduce flexibility here. The capacity to write on the notes is important, I've found. The way Powerpoint prints the slides, there's automatically a reasonable amount of space, but if you're not using Powerpoint, make sure that there's plenty of white space.
3. Having the notes fit on only one sheet of paper is a really good idea. The first reason is that it's a useful piece of mast-binding when one has the urge to cram just a bit more into the 50 minutes. The second reason, you'll appreciate when standing by the photocopier 5 minutes before the lecture.
4. Leaving extra copies for students who miss the lecture means that students who are ill, or have work commitments, or whatever, are not restricted to the tapes of the lectures, and don't have to be in a position to borrow notes from others. It also means that students might feel that they don't have to go to the lectures, but I'm not too fussed about this. It's about flexibility.
5. One of the unanticipated benefits of the notes is that students have at a glance the structure of the discussion. When using slides, it's not always easy to jump back to an earlier point, and without slides it's even more difficult – and one isn't always sensitive to the need. This way, students can quickly check a formulation or distinction or quotation – and be confident in that – and the flow of discussion can continue. (In fact, this returns to one of the benefits blackboards can have, but nothing is erased, and the writing's legible).

I could go on about this, but I'll finish with some emphases, and one final comment.

I wanted to make three main points:

1. that Flexible Delivery should not be reduced to distance education and the adoption of education technology;
2. that it be adopted, understood and evaluated in terms of its capacity to satisfy concerns about the quality of teaching and learning (which I refer to as pedagogical concerns); and
3. that I have found that handing out lecture notes in the way I do (which I claim to be an instance of adopting Flexible Delivery) is a practice which has improved the quality of teaching and learning in my subjects.

A final comment. Although I've claimed that I've adopted Flexible Delivery practices, I don't think that the move itself is enough. I think that whatever techniques one adopts in teaching there isn't going to be real improvement unless one adopts and implements them as ways of improving teaching and learning. Techniques need to be adopted in the context of pedagogical strategies, and strategies need to be formulated in the context of informed pedagogical goals.

Take my own case. I realised that a high degree of interaction is crucial in learning philosophy. My strategy involved handouts, a revised approach to lecturing, and evaluations. But these changes have worked only because they are used with the aim of increasing interaction. Just using handouts was not enough. Handouts had to be part of a package (and in this regard the evaluations have been very important), and I had to use them with interaction always in mind.