

## Podcast – September 1, 2006

### Active Learning – The Key to Online Success

I've talked before about getting online students involved in their class and a book by Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson called *Engaging the Online Learner* helped me to rethink some important issues. First, it's important to appreciate the pedagogical foundation of effective online teaching and learning. The concept of active learning has been around for a long time, about a century ago Dewey discussed the importance of actively involving the learner; central to Piaget's philosophy is the concept of learning being connected to the learner's experience before it is meaningful; and Vygotsky emphasized how important to learning social interaction was. So the idea or importance of interaction in education is a theme that runs through many learning theories and, particularly, the construct talked about a lot in education – constructivism. Conrad & Donaldson (2004, p. 5) cite comments by Smith and Ragan:

The key assumptions of individual constructivism are the following:

- Knowledge is constructed from experience.
- Learning results from a personal interpretation of knowledge
- Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience. Learning is collaborative with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives.

The main point here is that activities that stimulate active involvement and encourage collaboration with others promote a deeper level of understanding. In fact, some go so far as to suggest that instructors who focus only on content acquisition are sabotaging the real goal of education. Weigel (quoted in Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, p. 5) says that "Content is the clay of knowledge; learning takes place when it is fashioned into something meaningful." In online classes, collaboration among learners is what molds the clay into knowledge.

Constructivism and active learning emphasize the importance of students constructing their own knowledge and, while I accept this premise, I also recognize the necessity for the instructor to create the structure of the online class and design the learning activities that encourage active learning on the part of the students. And here is where our educational experience (instructors and students alike) works against us: We have been exposed to the lecture model of education and many feel most comfortable with that approach. However, while lecture can be an effective means of knowledge transmission, Conrad & Donaldson argue that ". . . if it is the primary strategy used in the online environment, the course becomes a digital correspondence course with potential problems of learner isolation and high dropout rate" (p. 6). One of the issues that has most concerned me about our online classes is the high dropout rate (and this pattern is true across all higher educational institutions). The message from these authors is that whatever we call it – interaction, engagement, active learning, building community – the most crucial variable in online learning is getting the learner involved in the course and getting away from the passive lecture model that still dominates in f2f education. The

most important role for the online instructor then is not content dissemination but creating interactivity and participation by all in the class.

The challenge for both online instructors and students is to embrace this constructivist paradigm. It's a challenge because it requires rejecting the lecture model we're all more comfortable with and creating a different learning environment. Conrad & Donaldson (2004 p. 8) comment that

However, interaction and collaboration are not intuitive to many adult learners who grew up under the competitive model of education where learners had to outshine one another to be successful. Initially, a learner may be more comfortable in the perceived safe role of a passive student and will need guidance and the opportunity to exercise leadership and direction-setting in an online environment."

Since this discussion has been pretty theoretical up to now, let me end with a couple of practical suggestions to stimulate active engagement and collaboration among online students.

Mystery Student Contest. I ask students to develop their Bb homepage during the first week of class. Rather than simply ask students to view each others' homepages to find out a little about their classmates, I conduct a "Mystery Student Contest" in which students have to answer questions about each other based on homepage data ([http://daphne.palomar.edu/psyc100/Forms/Mystery\\_SummerFall2006.htm](http://daphne.palomar.edu/psyc100/Forms/Mystery_SummerFall2006.htm)). This activity accomplishes several objectives consistent with the active learning ideas I've discussed.

- students get to know each other and discover what they have in common with others
- students are actively involved in an activity that is presented as a game or contest
- I communicate my expectation that they will be active participants in the course
- they get some practice in a skill (completing a FrontPage form) that they will be doing throughout the semester
- since this is an easy and fun activity, students start off the course with a positive attitude

Team Building Activity. This activity is widely used in education and translate well to the online environment. It is the familiar lifeboat dilemma. Students list the most vital items they can think of and then most negotiate with their other group members to determine the exact items (limited to say 10 items) to bring onto the lifeboat.

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Reference:: Conrad, R.M., Donaldson, J.A. 2004. John Wiley & Sons, Ind.