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Teaching beliefs and the practice of e-moderators: Presage, process and product

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Abstract: *This paper examines the beliefs, intentions and actions of e-moderators by observing these interactions during the presage, process and product phases of online discussion forums (Biggs, 1988).*

While the structure provided by Biggs' 3P Model is used to highlight the interrelationships of the various steps of online teaching, this paper proposes that because individuals' teaching beliefs and practices are diverse and may have equal validity, that this variation in teaching perspectives has the potential to enrich the learning experience of students. This view contrasts with current literature that appears to promote aspects of constructivism as the only legitimate teaching/learning approach.

Findings from the study show that aspects of all five perspectives from the Pratt (1998) framework could be identified in e-moderators' design plans, interactions with students, and assessment approaches. These steps are related to Biggs' 3P Model and were used to represent aspects of teaching perspectives in the online domain.

The research also showed that if teaching success can be equated with the extent of learning engagement, this achievement appears to be linked primarily to the relationships developed within the learning community and to the scaffolding provided, rather than to the dominant teaching perspectives of individual teachers. These findings indicate that e-moderators from the Presage of any teaching perspective, who have an underlying ability to reflect on their own practices, are potentially able to engage their learners during the Process of the course and enable them to achieve mutually satisfactory Products.

Keywords: *teaching beliefs, e-moderation, discussion forums*

Introduction

The combination of the internal beliefs, experiences and understandings gained by teachers gives rise to an edifice which teachers use to underpin their professional practice. In recent decades the overlap between personal epistemology and teaching practice has been investigated under the umbrella of educational frameworks. A number of educational frameworks have been developed in attempts to summarise and systematise the experiences underpinning the analytical constructs of teachers' values and guiding principles (Bain, Mills, McNaught & Lueckenhausen, 2000; Foley 2000; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Pratt and Associates, 1998).

This paper explores educational frameworks that underpin contemporary teaching from the proposition that the factors that guide or motivate teachers to engage students in a face-to-face teaching environment are likely to also influence their actions and beliefs in an interactive online situation (Bain, Mills, McNaught & Lueckenhausen, 2000). The principle that underpins this research is that all teachers, including e-moderators, share a number of beliefs, intentions and actions, known collectively as teaching perspectives and that these extend beyond the purely constructivist. This paper attempts to illustrate the interconnections between these beliefs, intentions and actions with the 3P model described by Biggs (1988) as shown in Figure 1.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted to examine the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPIs) of five e-moderators from New Zealand and Australian tertiary institutions based on a framework designed by Pratt (1998). Artefacts selected for analysis included: (1) the TPI questionnaire - available online at: www.teachingperspectives.com, (2) interviews with e-moderators, (3) a series of reflections-in-action, (4) discussion board postings and (5) electronic focus groups with learners. Pratt's framework was selected for this research for the following reasons:

1. It specifically considered the perspectives of the teacher, rather than a blended approach of both teacher and learner,
2. Taking a non-judgemental approach, it represented five identified different perspectives as having equal value,
3. Pratt and Collins (2000) had already established a related online questionnaire, their Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI), which had been applied to some 6000 practitioners over a number of years and which proved to be an ideal tool for this research endeavour,
4. The design of the TPI questionnaire highlighted potential discrepancies between espoused beliefs and teachers' practice-in-action, and allowed this aspect to be targeted for further investigation.

Theoretical comparisons between Pratt's TPI and Biggs' 3P model

The basic assumption of the Pratt framework is that teaching perspectives are developed as a direct outcome of a person's beliefs and commitments, and can be identified through an individual teacher's attitudes towards their learners, their teaching ideals, and their relationship with the content of their subject in any given context. Intentions are the key to the nature of this impact as they constitute the planning stage, or 'the teacher's statement of purpose, responsibility or commitment directed towards learners, content, context, ideals or some combination of these' (Pratt, 1998, p.18).

The fundamental features of the five perspectives are:

- Transmission - the perspective that concentrates on the effective delivery of content,
- Apprenticeship - ways of 'being' are modelled,
- The Developmental perspective - cultivates ways of thinking,
- The Nurturing perspective - facilitates self-efficacy, and
- Social Reform - seeks improvements in society.

At first sight there seem to be straightforward chronological parallels between beliefs, intentions and actions (Pratt, 1998) and the concepts of presage, process and product (Biggs, 1988). However, on closer examination, potential interrelations between the two models are more complex (see Figure 1) as many of the processes of e-moderation do not lie neatly within a single area or timeframe. For example, the beliefs of teachers certainly forms part of the Presage phase but that same combination of beliefs also

underpins the events during the online discussions, and then continues to play an important role in the final assessment and evaluation of the entire teaching procedure (Product).

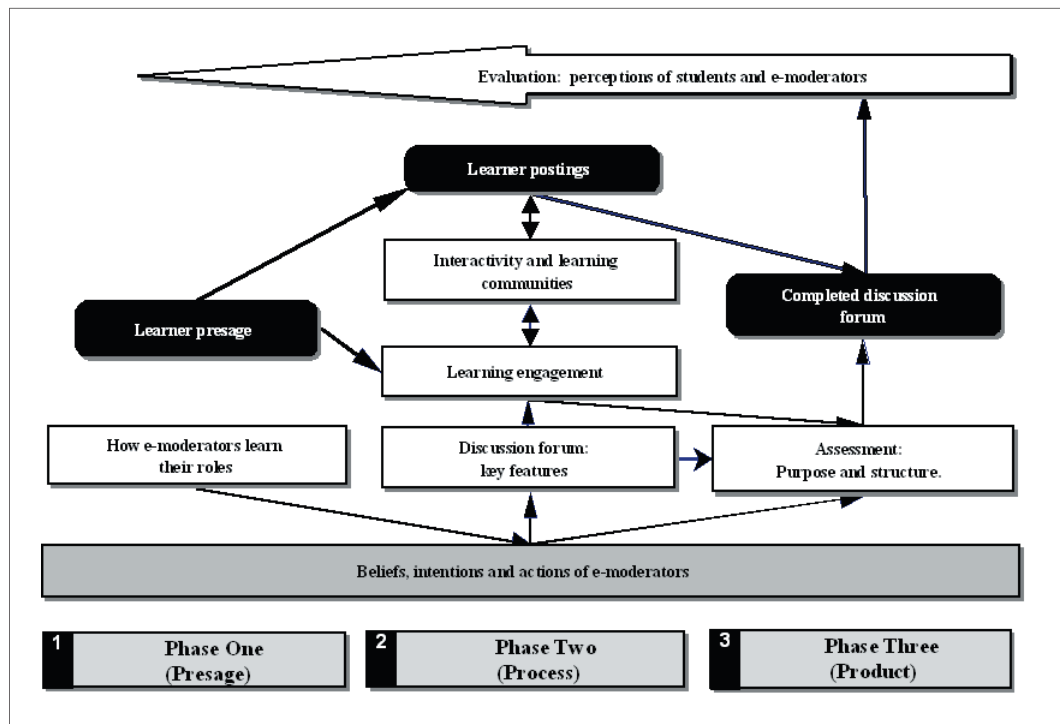


Figure 1. Elements of discussion forums as teaching tools

Figure 1 also shows that presage affects process, in particular the structure of the discussion forum, including the sociocognitive aspects of the design, such as learner engagement, interactivity and the development of learning communities, as well as the form of any assessment. The details of assessment are primarily considered within the final phase of this model, Product, although the nature of the assessment will also depend on the basic beliefs of the e-moderator.

Despite discrepancies between the two frameworks, the 3P model enables the different phases of an online discussion forum to be related to substantial research carried out in face-to-face classrooms (Entwistle & Walker, 2002).

Findings

Table 1 illustrates the TPI's of all five e-moderators in a simplified format, without indicating any details within their overall raw data scores. This Table shows that all five participants in this study were recessive in the Transmission perspective, while their dominants lay in either the Apprenticeship or Nurturing modes. Nevertheless, all five of the teachers also showed the Developmental (constructivist) perspective within their strongly held perspectives.

The main differences between them showed in the way they saw their impact on learner engagement in online discussions. Number 5, while recognising the influence that she had on this process, considered

that students engaged primarily with the content of the material, a view shared by Number 1; a view which lies firmly in the transmission characteristics. For the remaining three e-moderators engagement was firmly linked to a range of sociocultural teaching schemas (Kaiden, 1998; Karabenick & Collins-Eaglin, 1997).

E-mods	Transmission	Apprenticeship	Developmental	Nurturing	Social Reform
1	(34)	41	43	<u>44</u>	41
2	(28)	35	42	31	32
3	(35)	<u>42</u>	41	<u>42</u>	(33)
4	(33)	<u>40</u>	37	<u>40</u>	(31)
5	(24)	43	41	42	29

() denotes recessive perspective; _ denotes dominant perspective

Table 1. Teaching perspectives of the e-moderators

Discussion

The types of discussion forums designed by the five participants were varied and in the majority instances appeared to relate directly to the key descriptors of the various TPis. The main features of the discussions as they relate to Pratt's five perspectives are indicated on Table 2.

The model shown in Table 2 indicates the translation of the characteristic attributes of each of the five teaching perspectives, based wherever possible on evidence provided by the five e-moderators in this study. In some case however, where this was only present to a limited extent, the online interpretation has also been supported by material from relevant literature on online teaching planning and procedures (Salmon, 2000, Collison et al, 2000).

The transmission perspective

Despite the fact that all of the participants in this study showed recessiveness in the Transmission perspective, it is still possible to draw reasoned deductions about such characteristics from the evidence obtained, since all teachers possess elements of each perspective.

For example, it is anticipated that features such as content and its subsequent assessment (product) will play a major role in the way in which a teacher holding transmission perspectives will attempt to engage students in an online discussion. Furthermore, concerns over the power this process places in the hands of the teacher are not likely to be held as valid by teachers who see power as a natural part of their position in the academic hierarchy (Foucault, 1988), operating particularly in the field of assessment.

Perspective (Alternative terms)	Online discussion planning (Presage)	Online Implementation (Process & Product)
Transmission Behaviourist, Objectivist	Plans assessment - locating learners within knowledge hierarchy. High level of specified readings. Events clearly pre-defined. Anticipates student compliance.	Feedback - teacher 'corrects' & adds text insights. Directs student to resources. Teacher provides (extensive) answers explanations, and summaries. Assesses using levels of outcomes.
Developmental Constructivist.	May develop problem solving & case studies. Assess for reflection, analysis & reasoning. May use 'private spaces'. Uses 'everyday' examples. Requires meaning to be demonstrated. Teacher's interactions gradually fade. Limits content. Values student interactivity. Plans collaborative strategies.	May model postings. More q than a. and limits own participation. Qs designed to encourage reflection. Emphasises experience linked to theory. May provide web sites. Adapts to learners' understandings. May use self/peer assessment.
Apprenticeship Cognitive apprenticeship, Situated cognition.	Tasks highly structured – move from simple and marginal to complex and central. May use 'private spaces'. Collaborative/cooperative situations. Poses authentic issues or problems. Assessments progressively 'in-depth'.	Uses 'real' situations often via suggested web sites. High level of initial postings. Uses learners' language. May model postings & assessment for desired levels of performance. Teacher gradually fades.
Nurturing Humanist	Self-assessment or peer -assessment. Assessment may be based on individual progress. Uses prior knowledge. Loose structure but may develop case studies.	Encouraging, empathetic comments. Use of private communications. Uses questions to challenge & engage learners. Provides support for students' learning difficulties.
Social reform Transformation, Social learning. Critical pedagogy	Attempts to transform ideas. Poses conflict issues. May use case studies. Collaborative design.	Critically reflective. Questions all underlying assumptions. Teacher may not take part. Encourages text deconstruction.

Table 2. Teaching perspectives: Into the online context

In regard to the process of the discussion, recognising that the transmission perspective is frequently associated with aspects of teacher centred learning, it is considered likely that such an e-moderator might feel it necessary to play a major role in any discussion in order to correct statements made by students which appeared to be inaccurate, intervene in order to clarify points of complexity, or add their own text insights. One of the further 'give away' features could be that teachers of this kind could be inclined to feel it is their duty to rapidly and regularly answer questions posed by members of the class (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003). Finally, at the conclusion of any discussion a transmissionalist might well feel the

need to summarise the dialogue, and by this process, deliberately or unwittingly demonstrate his or her knowledge and authority, frequently enhanced by the use of subject terminology not utilised by the class members.

The developmental perspective

The constructivist nature of this perspective could be seen when e-moderators base part or all of the process of their online discussions on problem solving or case study formats, as was the situation with e-moderators 1 and 2. This approach is consciously developed to engage their students with deep level, critical thinking processes (Laurillard, 1993, Rosie, 2000). Furthermore, the significance of reflection, analysis and critical reasoning are likely to be reflected in the assessment criteria. In some cases the developmental perspective of the teacher might encourage them to gradually hand over the assessment role to students, so that the learners themselves may perform critiques of discussion contributions, although none of the five e-moderators took such a step in this study.

Other planning issues that demonstrate the developmental perspective can be seen in structures designed to encourage scaffolding of new ideas onto the pre-existing experiences and understandings of individual students. This use of 'bridging' appears in the emphasis placed by the e-moderator upon links between individual experiences and the theories being discussed in the course. All of the e-moderators interviewed, with the exception of Number 2, stressed the need for learners to relate new information or ideas to their own professional experiences and most included this aspect in their assessment criteria. These bridging features can be also identified in the planned organisation of courses where private online spaces, such as student journals or portfolios, are integral components of the online structure and provide places for students to receive individual attention or support from the e-moderator.

The apprenticeship perspective

At first sight many of the visible features of the apprenticeship perspective have also been seen in some degree in one or other of the two perspectives described above. However, when the overall picture is considered, the features that emerge show a high degree of correlation with one another, both in the online domain and to the key concepts outlined in the original Pratt framework.

The main driver here is the concept of teacher as 'coach' and the teaching process as one of 'enculturation' into the world of the subject. This gives rise to the use of everyday examples, previously identified in the developmental perspective, taken a stage further in the apprenticeship perspective where authentic issues and tasks are classically seen by such e-moderators as having crucial significance to the teaching process. Furthermore, the online plans lead the learner by a series of highly structured steps from simple tasks and concepts to more complex understandings central to the topic area. Increasingly in-depth investigations of these 'real issues' are viewed as the ladder that underpins the course plan, and as a result assessments are developed which expect and acknowledge progressively more complex analyses to be performed by the students. Two e-moderators in this study with a high level of the Apprenticeship perspective demonstrated this approach to increasingly complex assessment tasks.

The significance given to interactivity between students is often also mirrored by the development of particular bonds between the teacher and the student. These frequently take the form of a mentoring relationship and once again private spaces may be developed as places where such individual support and feedback may take place. In both the gradual development of more complex tasks and the individual responses provided to students it is possible to see the Vygotskian requirements for student scaffolding in the practice of the apprenticeship-based e-moderator.

Overall, in true apprenticeship fashion, the teacher will gradually fade from the online postings during the Process phase to enable learners to practice independently. The students then are expected to adapt knowledge from their previous experience and only receive help from their e-moderator when they request it. In other words, the e-moderator may encourage students' moves to independence as they are seen to develop their own expertise.

The nurturing perspective

This perspective, which occurred in a dominant manner in three out of the five e-moderators who participated in this study, also seeks to facilitate deep levels of learning but through encouragement of the student's own steps to understanding. This tends to give rise to a number of features described previously in the developmental perspective scenario in which the linking of previous experiences to the current student context was also emphasised. However, it may be possible to distinguish between aspects of the two owing to the significance that nurturing teachers place on the emotional responses of the learners, emerging out of both experiences arising in Presage as well as those developing during the process stage.

This concern for the well being of students is visible in the implementation of the discussions, particularly in the use of encouraging, empathetic comments but can also be discerned in the planning of the online course elements. To illustrate this, during the process of the course, the discussion is likely to be structured in ways that avoid students developing dependency on the teacher. For example, self-support mechanisms may be provided such as help guides and collaborative working environments that are designed to relate to the real world of the student's own experiences.

The nurturing e-moderator frequently expresses appreciation of the learner's development in an open manner and learners are encouraged to recognise the successes of their own efforts. Through this process of self-affirmation the teacher intends that learners' self-confidence can also be enhanced and encourages this by using learner's language and identifying themselves in the role of co-inquirer.

However, when discussion forum assessment is examined as part of the product phase, occasionally issues may arise that can cause difficulties for teachers and students alike. The very flexibility of the design which enables the teacher to move in the direction of students' interests can lead to considerable divergence in the nature of the students' submissions and where this is part of the assessment process, a further step away from the application of set assessment criteria. Indeed, as students become increasingly engaged with the process of learning in relation to their own experiences this divergence is likely to increase. Nevertheless, this does allow the e-moderator to assess in a way that recognises individual's progress, a not-uncommon characteristic of the nurturing perspective.

The other aspect of the nurturing perspective, that of challenging or stretching the learner (T'Kenye, 1998) has also been seen within some of the discussions. Participant Number 3 used progressive questioning of her students not only as a scaffolding feature but also to encourage them to dig deeper into their understanding and attempt to articulate concepts which they had only previously implied in their postings.

The social reform perspective

The concept of learner engagement is pivotal to this perspective, and therefore its appearance should be readily observable, as passionate engagement with the subject is the *raison d'être* of a person holding this epistemology. This is primarily because an individual from a Social Reform perspective is driven more by ideology than is noted in any of the other perspectives and their passion may find many ways of expression.

Firstly, there may be a tendency to use clear and pre-planned structures, such as case studies, that are designed to encourage reflective debate. Frequently, this is performed through the deliberate choice of conflict issues that question the underlying beliefs and values of the learners. Secondly, as this philosophy is underpinned by a teacher's belief in the social construction of knowledge, the basic online design tends to be collaborative, and this will take precedence over co-operative strategies as a way of maintaining the power balance in a class. For the same reason the teacher may not play an active role in the online discussion - by which mechanism they hope to minimise the obvious demonstration of their own relative position of power (Freire, 1972). For the same reason, when present online they will tend to act as co-inquirers rather than as authority figures.

Although none of the e-moderators in this study indicated dominant leanings towards the Social Reform teaching perspective through their TPIs, due to the fact that three demonstrated it as a back-up perspective, evidence of characteristics of this type could be found.

Conclusion

Evidence from this investigation has also shown that there is great variation in the nature of online e-moderation and that this diversity is reflected at each of the three phases of the 3P Model. The findings also show that this diversity of styles should be supported and encouraged as it allows teachers in this field to develop computer mediated communication techniques in line with their own strengths, perspectives and context requirements. However, this research has demonstrated that teacher proficiency as e-moderators, allied with their own prior experience as learners in this mode, has a considerable impact on the levels of learning achieved by their students. Additionally, it was found that observed online engagement was highly influenced by assessment criteria and grading schemes, as well as the prior experience an e-moderator might have had as an online learner.

The research showed that if teaching success can be equated with the extent of learning engagement, this achievement appears to be linked directly to the relationships developed within the learning community and to the scaffolding provided, rather than to the dominant teaching perspectives of individual teachers. These findings indicate that e-moderators from any teaching viewpoint, who have an underlying ability to reflect on their own practices, are potentially able to engage their learners.

Finally, it is recommended that a diversity of teaching styles, beyond that of constructivism alone, should be supported and encouraged as it allows e-moderators to develop a rich variety of computer mediated communication techniques in line with their own strengths, beliefs and context requirements.

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