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Web-Based Course Content: An Emerging Consideration for Authenticity from a Learner Perspective

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The illiterate of the future are not those that can’t read but those that can’t learn, unlearn, and relearn….Knowledge isn’t found in a book. It is obtained through purposeful effort.

–Anonymous Participant

More organizations and instructors are incorporating authentic learning strategies into the instructional paradigm of the classroom. One advantage of this ideology is that the diversity of individual learners can be capitalized upon through a dialogue consisting of multiple perspectives. In these contemporary classrooms, the curriculum becomes a more fluid, personal entity based on experience, prior knowledge and individual expertise (Bedford, Wiebe, and Tschida, 2008). At the same time, a plethora of information which draws upon multiple perspectives is also more readily available and accessible though electronic venues—primarily via the Internet. The abundance of available information provides opportunities for learners to intellectually interact with course content aligned with their diverse perspectives. This discourse should posit the instructional attention on the learners and their interaction with the opportunities that dynamic, web-based content affords. However, in many classrooms, much of the course content continues to be derived from traditional venues including textbooks and instructor expertise.

In higher education, the idea of using web-based content—or content that is acquired from public sources including the Internet and library databases—in lieu of textbooks is becoming a topic of scholarly discourse. Vernon (2006) cites advantages of electronic course content as being able to offer extensive supplemental information, contributing to diversity in perspectives, and more easily accessible than textbooks. In addition, web-based content provides for a more authentic learning experience for the student. An authentic approach to content interaction drawing from web-based resources embraces the diversity inherent in today’s classrooms (Oliver, 2001; Oblinger, 2007). It shifts the focus from the collective to the individual experience. It also facilitates learners’ efforts at integrating new ideas with their formerly established beliefs, values and experiences (Mezirow, 2000; Biggs, 1999).

As such, a proposal to evaluate an initiative in which textbooks were replaced with web-based content in select, bachelor degree courses represented an opportunity to gather evidence to begin to understand how instructors might advance the use of web-based content in their classrooms. Juxtaposed with active learning techniques, it was felt that web-based content would provide numerous benefits. These included creating a more authentic experience through a learner-centered pedagogical approach designed to capitalize on the diversity and experience adults bring to the classroom. In addition, it was felt that this approach would foster a life-long learning paradigm in learners. While the project implementation plan lacked comprehensive initial planning, organizational cohesion, and an effective assessment plan, lessons learned from the naturalistic evaluation data provides valuable evidence regarding how web-based content is viewed by instructors. This is an important first step to inform academic discourse that focuses on how the learner can develop deep, meaningful relationships with appropriate course content juxtaposed with their own perspectives and experiences.
While textbooks have primarily remained static and narrow in perspective, the demographics of American classroom students have evolved in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, preparedness, socioeconomic status and attitudes (Seurkamp, 2007). As these contemporary learners are looking for breadth in their learning, they are faced with textbooks that present course content based on a historically narrow perspective and insensitivity to time and place. According to Sewall, (1991) textbooks rarely relate generally accepted principles, concepts and theories about a topic in a non-biased and balanced way. Yet, they are the “bedrock on which the nation’s teachers build their lesson plans” (Sewall, p. 54).

The role of the textbook in education is juxtaposed with the role of the instructor who has been historically viewed as transmitter of knowledge (Driscoll, 2005). In more contemporary educational discourse however, the instructor is viewed as a facilitator of learning who guides a student towards self-discovery. This is accomplished though reflection and dialogue on the course content centered on diverse perspectives and individual experience (Bedford, Wiebe & Tschida, 2008). However, in order to facilitate others’ reflection and discourse, the instructor must first develop and maintain a conscious awareness of how their perspectives arise from their own sense of self. This internal consciousness is intended to facilitate an appreciation for how one’s own experiences and resulting biases affect their teaching style and delivery (Dirkx, 2006). As such, authenticity in the facilitation of learning increases the effectiveness of teaching as it is mediated largely through one’s knowledge of the subject matter, related experience and background, skill in being able to render the subject matter accessible and meaningful to learners, ability to listen to students, and capacity to understand and appropriately respond to…[the student’s] struggle to learn (Dirkx, p. 29).

Creating a more authentic pedagogical repertoire on the part of the faculty member in isolation of content issues, however, continues to posit the dialogue around the instructor and the instruction (Cranton & Carsuetta, 2004). It does not ensure that learners will have the resources (both information and skills) from which to draw conclusions aligned with their own beliefs and experiences. As instructors begin to approach the learning environment with added authenticity and emphasis on learner-centered pedagogies, equal attention needs to be given to engendering these characteristics in the learner. According to Oblinger (2007), “authentic learning intentionally brings into play multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives, ways of working, habits of mind, and community” (p. 3).

Drawing upon Internet sources as an alternative to textbook based content is generally overlooked as a viable way to introduce authenticity into the classroom. Replacing static content with electronic versions can offer learners a variety of perspectives on which to consider a phenomenon under investigation. This has the potential to meet the needs of contemporary, adult learners who are motivated by solving problems reflective of their unique experiences (Oblinger, 2007). Using web-based content, then, increases the potential for these adults to see their own voice within the curriculum and create greater sense of authenticity. This paradigm offers opportunities to enhance classroom interactivity to the level of the individual learner perspective rather than from an instructor or publisher point of view.

Overview: A Web-Based Content Initiative

Authentic interactivity with the attention focused on the learner requires consideration of the repositories of information available both electronically and through traditional venues. Embracing this
notion, a small, proprietary college in the U.S., consisting of multiple campuses and offering associate, bachelor’s and masters degree programs, implemented a web-based content initiative. The purpose of the initiative was to address issues of diversity, currency of information, and critical thinking through authentic interactivity.

With over 90% of their learners described as non-traditional (over 25 years of age, working full or part-time, and/or parenting) it was believed that web-based content would draw upon the experience and expertise that these individuals brought to the classroom and provide more a more rich learning experience. In addition, it was felt that incorporating web-based content into the curriculum would help learners develop the critical thinking and inquiry skills required to become lifelong learners who primarily engage in self-directed, informal study.

As such, five general education and eight business education courses in the bachelor’s program were identified based on enrollment and course competencies that were felt to be appropriate for this approach. Articulated competencies in these courses were centered on application, evaluation, and synthesis activities rather than approaches designed to increase a learner’s knowledge and comprehension. In addition, rather than a traditional lecture format, these courses would also be designed to incorporate the use of active learning techniques which, as described by Bedford, Wiebe, and Tschida (2008) are facilitated through dialogue, reflection, and cooperative engagement among peers. The course design also adhered to Fink’s (2007) suggestions in that instructors need to do “more than simply develop a list of topics in a course and then provide lots of information about each topic” (p. 14). Rather, courses were designed to be learner-centered and thus, appropriate for a web-based content venue that would embrace the notion of authentic interactivity.

Drawing upon the work of Oliver (2001) and juxtaposed with a constructivist approach, authentic interactivity was defined for this project as a way in which learners would engage in self-discovery through web-based material aligned with course competencies and based on individual perspective. It rested on the assumption that the learners had the capacity to engage in critical thinking that would allow them to evaluate the relevant material, identify various perspectives, and recognize the concepts, terms, ideas, and theories salient to the topic (Leckie, 1996). However, these assumptions, while noble in their attempts to address contemporary, constructivist learning theory, presented a number of problems.

The design of the courses in this project required that learners do more than simply click on a link and read the content. Rather, learners would be expected to identify appropriate Internet resources on their own with the guidance of the instructor. As such, learners would not only need to locate appropriate Internet material, but to distinguish between credible and questionable sources. However, it was articulated early on in the project implementation that the majority of the learners likely lacked the technological expertise, critical thinking skills, and evaluative understandings to do so. While many were engaged in critical thinking and composition courses, the current curriculum did not necessarily support the development of these advanced skills.

Secondly, the majority of instructors at this organization were part-time adjuncts with full time work and personal responsibilities. It was unclear how these instructors would be able to develop a sense of the online content available to their learners and guide them towards meaningful, credible resources. In addition, while instructors reported that they engaged their learners in active learning strategies, anecdotal evidence suggested that their pedagogical practices primarily relied on traditional instructional techniques that involved lecturing from textbook content. Since classroom interactions are primarily standardized around textbook use (Sewall, 1991), removing them from the classroom added
significant challenges for the faculty and for the organization in terms of ensuring that learners received an equivalent, structured sequence of ideas and information. The organization addressed these issues with a number of strategies. First, they employed subject matter experts and instructional designers to identify appropriate Internet sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles from library databases. Based on pre-established criteria, standards, and learning objectives it was thought that learners could be given a “starting point” at which they could be exposed to the basic principles, concepts, and tenets aligned with the learning objectives. In instances in which Internet based content or peer-reviewed articles were deemed insufficient, custom “instructional materials” were written in-house as a supplement. These instructional materials were stored electronically in a learning object repository and were made available through hypertext links embedded within the curriculum.

Armed with foundational information provided in the instructional materials, the learner would be required to conduct additional research. This was intended to guide learners towards competency with the course learning outcomes based on their own prior knowledge, experience, and interest. The idea was that they would bring their research finding to class where they would engage in active learning strategies with their peers. They would be expected to compare the information they gathered with other sources and, under the guidance of the instructor, identify which resources best complimented the generally accepted principles of the discipline. This kind of dialogue, according to Spohn (2007) could lead towards a more authentic experience for learners as it draws upon thoughtful thinking processes. In addition, it was believed that this kind of purposeful engagement would help learners build an appreciation for alternative perspectives. The discourse then could help learners determine in what context those perspectives might be meaningful.

In order to facilitate this authentic interactivity, the organization recognized that not all instructors had the skills to negotiate such a curriculum. Accordingly, the organization developed a set of learning activities to accompany the recommended web-based content. The suggested learning activities, primarily collaborative and dialogic in nature, were intended to engage the learner in an active process of interacting with the web-based content through reflection and discourse both in the classroom and on their own. They were also designed to be facilitated by the instructor, draw upon the Internet content presented, and engage the learners in additional inquiry through Internet searches and identification of subsequent information on the topic. This strategy was intended to increase the learners’ opportunities to authentically interact with the content, while drawing upon higher order thinking skills.

The content and learning activities, aligned with the course outcomes, were delivered electronically to both instructors and learners in a text-based format that could be viewed online or printed. Instructors and learners received identical copies of courses materials under the assumption that this would aid in the self-directed of the learners. In addition, instructors were provided with multiple opportunities to engage in training designed to enhance their facilitation skills in using these materials. These training sessions were however, voluntary and uncompensated. Thus, attendance was minimal.

The implementation of the web-based content project at this organization was a top-down approach orchestrated and managed at the administrative level prior to any needs assessment or efforts to build support throughout the organization. While Hall and Hord (2001) suggest that this type of change can work, little consideration was given to instructor and learner readiness to undertake the challenge as intended. As such, a firm base of support at the implementation level was not secured (Caffarella, 2002). The project also lacked comprehensive evaluation planning and thus, little empirical data was collected formatively with regard to the project outcomes. Consequently, eighteen months after implementation, there was a plethora of anecdotal evidence that suggested frustration and a lack of
compliance on the part of faculty, dissatisfaction and complaints from learners, and administrative concern for falling student retention rates.

Method

Eighteen months into the initiative, amidst frustration and criticism, I engaged in an evaluation project to identify the compliance level and attitudes towards the web-based content initiative. The evaluation was to focus on the faculty involved with courses identified for the use of web-based content. I chose to utilize a descriptive, qualitative approach in an effort to provide a thick, rich response to the evaluation questions as well as answer fundamental concerns about compliance. Drawing upon the work of Kanbur, (2001) I incorporated a structured, written interview design supported by some quantitative information. During instrument development, I was cognizant of how much of this type of “simultaneous mixing” (Kanbur, p. 6) could be done without losing the essence and the strength of the primary qualitative techniques. As such, quantitative data was collected only in those areas considered necessary for clarification and that might be overlooked in a qualitative, written interview that did not allow for follow-up responses. This resulted in an instrument consisting of five open-ended qualitative questions, four yes-no response items, and one fixed sum scale item.

The interviews were presented to a sample of 30 faculty members who were assigned to classes utilizing the web-based content approach developed by the organization. The participants were part of a potential population of 102 faculty members and were selected using a sampling technique described by Patton, (1987) as maximum variation sampling to ensure diversity in subject matter, geographical dispersion, and longevity with the organization. The evaluation focused on faculty rather than students or administrators because, according to Baron and Graham (2007), instructors are considered the key innovators in an educational change process. They state, “While different change agents have varying degrees of authority based on their position in the organizational hierarchy,… [instructors] can be powerful within their circle of influence” (¶ 25). In addition, since learning outcomes are primarily grounded in the instructor and the instruction (Clark, 1983), a focus on the pedagogical practices and instructor paradigm seemed key.

A structured, written interview strategy was introduced to increase effectiveness and quality of the data. According to Handy and Ross (2005) “written accounts have been shown to be a time-efficient means of gathering good-quality, descriptively rich data” (p. 40). Furthermore, this technique is especially appropriate in cases in which participants are well-educated and able to articulate their thoughts in writing. Additional advantages of the written interview technique is more highly focused, reflective data and more effective management of the social dynamics of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, this technique allowed for a more stream-lined and timely analytic process.

Interview and survey questions were based on the information provided through the anecdotal evidence previously gathered from faculty. This included e-mails and recollections of conversations with administrative staff. The quantitative portion of the survey questionnaire included single response questions that gathered background data on training activity, classroom practices, and perceived student performance. The fixed scale sum item asked how much classroom time was spent engaged in specific pedagogical techniques, (discussion, lecture, cooperative activities, etc.). The raw data from these quantitative questions was synthesized with the qualitative responses to further inform the analysis (Handy & Ross, 2001).

The qualitative data was used to primarily inform the outcomes of the evaluation. It included opportunities for participants to free-write regarding the challenges, benefits, and concerns they had
about relying on web-based content in their classrooms. Although the qualitative responses were written, they were treated as an interview data collection technique for purposes of analysis. As such, I employed an analytic plan that involved a comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) approach and included a three-step process of coding, categorizing, and synthesizing themes. Intertwined within the three step process, I performed a content analysis technique described by Patton (1987) through which coherent and salient themes and patterns throughout the data were identified.

Results

Of the 30 identified participants, all but one (n=29) responded after a two-week response period and two follow up requests. Without omission, the participants responded to each of the quantitative questions—which focused on classroom practices and training. This data revealed that one quarter of the participants attended a training session, all said that they relied on active learning strategies to engage their learners, 80% used traditional assessments, and almost 60% believed that their students would perform better if reverted to the use of textbooks. Tables 1 and 2 summarize this information.

Table 1
Participant Training and Classroom Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Number of Responses (n=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I attended a training session to learn more about how to use web-based content in my classroom.</td>
<td>23.3% No 76.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I primarily use active learning techniques in my classroom.</td>
<td>100% 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use pencil-paper tests and quizzes to assess my students’ learning.</td>
<td>80% 20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Perceptions about Student Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Number of Responses (n=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion, compared to textbook based courses that I have taught, my students who use web-based content perform…</td>
<td>3.4% Better 37.9% About the Same 58.6% Worse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fixed-scale item asked participants to identify how much of their classroom time was spent engaged in specific pedagogical techniques. The data derived from responses to this question are presented in Table 3 in terms of the mean, the median and the range of responses. This sum to
constant style item asked participants to enter responses in each category with the total of all categories adding up to one hundred percent (Alreck & Settle, 2004).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical Practice</th>
<th>Number of Responses (n=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Class Question/Answer Session</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Dialogue</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Study</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Presentations</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (field trip, guest speaker, lab, etc.)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative questions served to provide the faculty with an opportunity to reflect on and express their opinion about the use of web-based content in their classroom with regard to the pedagogical challenges and perceived student perspective. Participant responses ranged from one or two sentences to half a page per question. Analysis of the qualitative narrative revealed three primary themes. First, access to quality information was a main concern articulated by participants. In general, the participants felt that the quality of the recommended resources was inferior to that included in traditional textbooks.

A second theme centered on pedagogical challenges including referencing specific information in a classroom in which Internet access or other technological support was not available. The participants also identified difficulties in their attempts to juxtapose traditional instructional techniques with an authentic learning environment. The third theme to emerge was concerned with student preparedness and their ability to draw upon the critical thinking and inquiry skills needed to interact with the curriculum as presented as well as negotiate logistical issues such as time management.

Interwoven with the quantitative data, I discuss these three themes—Access to Quality Information, Pedagogical Challenges, and Student Preparedness—in detail in the following sections. Within the discussion, I embed select quotes from the participants in an effort to provide explanatory information and summarize the essence of the analysis.

Access to Quality Information

One of the major themes that emerged was the belief that the recommended Internet sources and “instructional materials” did not provide the quality or depth of information that students could gain from
the textbooks. A variety of statements regarding the credibility and quality of web-based sources were made by participants. One particularly expressive participant stated,

Students and faculty are nearly unanimous in that the Internet materials are inferior to the textbooks formerly used. The students are cynical about the situation and complain about it. I have found that the instructional materials are simplistic and inaccurate, and the Internet sites are often irrelevant to the subject.

Another stated, “they [the students] want the ‘whole picture’ that the textbooks provide.” Although Internet sites were identified by subject matter experts who deemed them to be quality and accurate, instructors continued to feel that information from the textbooks was superior and, in some cases, circumvented the process. One instructor summarized his own strategy by saying, “I have taken the previous books and copied them. Then, I gave a copy to each student. That’s 27 copies.” Many also believed that the peer-review process involved in textbook publishing was a critical component missing from the development of the curricular materials. One participant stated, “How can we be giving material to students that is not peer-reviewed. The notion that this is superior to textbooks is presumptuous; let’s get real about it.”

A few participants expressed an understanding of the process and intent, but felt that they needed additional support. One such participant summarized this concept by saying, “I believe that I can make better use of this strategy but it will take some time and extra work on my part in order to fully appreciate the benefits.”

Pedagogical Challenges

Choices with regard to pedagogical strategies seemed to interfere with the ability of instructors to manage the logistics of the use of web-based content in the classroom. This appeared to be an issue that was not addressed within the initial project design. A common theme among these individuals was articulated by one, who stated, “For my students, not having the book in front of them during class is a huge issue. Yes, they can download and print the information, but that is costly and not always practical.” Other participants expressed their concern about their ability to reference specific content by discussing the technology available in the classrooms. One stated,

It is just too hard to try to figure out what all we are going to need printed. In some classrooms in which there is Internet access and, if a projector is available, I can display the content for the class to view. This is not ideal, though. Many students are older and cannot see such fine print. They also like to highlight material and make notes. This method makes it impossible to do that.

Participants were also clear that they felt the quality of the course was higher when using a traditional textbook, although there was no empirical data with which to support this claim. One stated, “In my opinion, the quality of the courses was higher when we were using the textbook.” This belief among faculty is also supported by quantitative data presented in Table 2.

Pedagogical practices aligned with the web-based content appeared to be a significant issue although not clearly understood by all the participants. Organizational policy was that instructors were to use active learning in these courses but there was no mechanism in place to clearly define this term nor was a vehicle to ensure compliance put into practice. As a result much of the class time was spent engaged in a traditional environment in which the instructor lectured or posed questions to the entire class (see Table 3). Paradoxically, 100% of the participants said that their classroom environment
centered on active learning techniques (see Table 1).
The participants did not address this duality specifically in their qualitative responses. One area in which they did address the issue of pedagogical techniques was centered on assessment. Despite the organizational focus on authentic activity, 80% of the participants (n=29) indicated that they used traditional tests and quizzes in their courses (see Table 1). As such, instructors struggled with how to ensure that students gained the specific knowledge needed to do well on them. One stated, “How can I just let the students sit around and talk about this material when they need to know specific facts for the test. To get around this, I have created study guides that I go over with them in class. This better prepares them for the true/false and multiple choice type tests items.” Another stated, “If you don’t give them a test, how do you know that they have learned all the terminology and concepts they will need? As they move up in their program, they will need to know these things.”

Student Preparedness

Concern for the student perspective on the use of web-based content was a final theme identified in the data. This was illustrated in a number of ways including through analogous statements made by participants centered on student readiness for a learner-centered approach in the classroom. While many of the participants deemed learner-centered pedagogy as critical to student success, they did not embrace this as a salient aspect of this project. Rather, they seemed to suggest that their traditional styles with which they were familiar were more aligned with the learner-centered approach. One participant summed this issue up as follows:

Most often students need to move from a structured environment of learning to an unstructured one. It is a process and a learning style [that] that can’t reach across all disciplines and at all levels and [still] be appropriate [for all]. Some students need structure. An approach that utilizes both an active, experiential, and structured approach works best. I don’t see that approach being supported.

Another issue that emerged within the student preparedness theme was the belief that students lacked the skills to identify appropriate information and discriminate credible information from suspicious. Participants also shared their concerns for learner success in light of the perceived lack of critical thinking skills and research inquiry. One instructor explained his concerns in the following way:

I attempted to use it [the web-based content] for the first two weeks and after the struggles, I knew that my students would not learn what they needed to learn and that is not what I do! My goal is to ensure that students have the materials they need to take those skills out into the real world.

Many of the participants indicated that they compensated for the students’ inability to extend their knowledge through their own exploration by identifying additional information themselves. One such participant commented, “Since the recommended material is so shallow, I still need to supplement it with information that I identify. Another participant added, “Since they weren’t given any real tools on how to identify appropriate material I typically find the material for them and make copies.”

Parallel issues of student preparedness dealt with the demographics of the students attending the school. One participated stated, “Our students’ needs were not taken into consideration. Some of our students do not have computers or printers at home.” Another issue that instructors identified was the time involved for students to research, identify and study appropriate material versus providing them with the information in textbook format. “Students say to me, ‘How can I take care of my kids and still get all of this done. You are the experts. You are supposed to tell me what I need to know. That’s what I
pay for.'"

When asked how they respond to student questions and concerns, many of the instructors indicated that they openly objected to using web-based content. One of the more participants stated, “I just tell them straight forward. This is what we’ve been told to do. We’ll make the best of it. I’ll help you get through it.” Another stated,

What are we supposed to say? This whole entire process has not been marketed to staff properly at all. It has been crammed down our throats with no input and then we are told to make it a positive experience for our students. We need to get real with ourselves.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of the web-based content initiative at this University was to develop life-long learners. It was also designed to foster independent learning skills that included critical thinking and inquiry. The intent was well-grounded in adult education theory, in which adults seek to make meaning of new concepts, ideas, and theories through an examination of their own experiences (Mezirow, 2000; Biggs, 1999). Those within the adult education community might herald such an endeavor as an innovative, contemporary strategy based on constructivist thinking. However, the lack of attention to parallel and sometimes competing best practice implementation strategies, led to a less than positive outcome.

The articulated philosophical orientation of the web-based content project was based on a pedagogical framework designed to support the diversity and experience of the learners in a way that reflected a contemporary paradigm. However, the flawed execution resulted in a tainting of the data and limited the generalizability of the findings. As such, the data was only able to inform attitudes and classroom practices rather than learning outcomes or actual benefits (or challenges) to the learners. However, since pedagogical success on the part of the learner is grounded in instructor expertise and instructional effectiveness (Clark, 1983) the data gives some insight into how web-based content was used in this situation, as well as how it might be introduced into other settings.

The emerging themes in the data converged on issues salient to both teaching and learning. Instructors were primarily concerned that they provide the students with the information that they deemed appropriate and, in most cases, it was felt that this information could most effectively be derived from textbooks. One of basic tenets associated with the use of web-based content is to capitalize on learner diversity. This was to lead to authentic discovery of the knowledge and information that would lead to course competencies in a meaningful context to the individual learner (Bedford, Wiebe & Tschida, 2008). A personal connection of this nature with the content is designed to serve a number of purposes. These include increasing a learner’s capacity to negotiate the curriculum with the instructor and addressing multiple perspectives within the classroom setting (Wise, Adrian & Dudka, 2008). However, instructors seemed unwilling to give up their authority as transmitters of knowledge as described by Driscoll (2005). Despite the proliferation of information available to learners, instructors, for the most part, chose to continue to define the learning content. They did this by introducing the content as static, discipline specific fact without regard for alternative perspectives. They utilized a number of mechanisms to facilitate this effort including the photocopying of textbooks, development of study guides and the reliance on instructor-focused pedagogy. As such, the learning process did not include elements of learner authenticity in the spirit of the project and did little to embrace individuality.

However, the participants’ comments regarding their desire for learner success suggested that this was not a vain attempt at power and control. While Hall and Hord (2001) suggest that the top down approach to change can be successful, a horizontal approach in which each individual is challenged to
change, allowing for appropriate intervention is best. Using the top down approach in this case did not give all the stakeholders adequate input into the implementation. As a result, the instructors did not have the sufficient background and knowledge to implement the project in the way in which it was intended and expressed frustration with their role.

Instructor comments implied that they were genuinely concerned that learners have access to quality course content aligned with generally accepted practices within the discipline. The participants indicated that they understood that self-discovery of content through reflection and dialogue could bring about transformation within the individual learner (Mezirow, 2000). However, they doubted that the learning outcomes of the courses they were teaching could be met using web-based content. As a result, many resorted to traditional practices (such as lecturing from textbook material and engaged the learners in the memorization of facts) in which they had confidence and perceived success. These strategies lacked consideration for how the learners were engaging in deep-meaningful learning (Biggs, 1999) designed to develop life-long, independent thinkers. Since the participants lacked empirical evidence to validate their claims regarding the learner’s ability to engage in critical thinking and scholarly inquiry, they relied on their own intuition and anecdotes from their own practice.

Many of the participants articulated that they based their instructional decisions on generally accepted best practice pedagogies. However, their understanding of the associated concepts was in isolation of a synthesized paradigm on contemporary teaching and learning theory. For example, many instructors believed in their role as transmitters of knowledge (Driscoll, 2005) and that it was their job to ensure that the learners had access to the material that they (the instructor) deemed important. However, their responses also involved a discourse that supported active and experiential learning. This resulted in a paradox in which their articulated beliefs about learning were misaligned with their actions. Furthermore, the participants were also not able to articulate an internal consciousness reflective of an understanding of how their own experiences and biases might affect their teaching (Dirkx, 2006). Consequently, they relied upon anecdotal evidence that supported their previously developed, personal theories. These theories were situated in prior successes and pedagogical strategies that had historically resulted in student success measured in their own terms. For the most part, it did not support the learners’ development of a deep-meaningful relationship with the content in a variety of contexts (Biggs, 1999).

The participants also recognized that, in this age of electronic information, those passionate about any given topic can provide a narrative based on his/her individual perspective. This narrative can then be published on the Internet without regard for diverse or opposing points of view and lacked peer-review. The participants’ comments demonstrated empathy for the learners who they believed lacked appropriate critical thinking and inquiry skills to identify appropriate content themselves. They also cited concerns for those who had life circumstances which limited the time they had available to commit to the learning process. As such, they challenged the assumptions that adult learners seek to build the capacity to engage in the critical thinking and inquiry skills necessary to discern the credible from the mendacious (Leckie, 1996) by providing material to the learners.

The participants failed to recognize their role in the development critical thinking and inquiry skills in their learners. They used the term active learning, but not in a way in which they recognized it as an environment in which they could guide and nurture the novice learner. Rather, they defined it as allowing learners to ask questions and provide input, but chose to primarily utilize more authoritarian and traditional classroom techniques based on their own perspectives. This resulted in a less authentic teaching situation as described by Cranton and Carsutetta (2004) and, in turn, a less authentic learning environment. Furthermore, the participants gave no indication of a culture of interactivity that would
support a dialogue centered on the individual learner needs except in superficial rhetoric. Instead, the dialogue centered on what the instructor felt was best for a generalized population. As it was, the learner's own appreciation for how their experiences and resulting biases affected their knowledge acquisition and integration was not considered.

Conclusions

The intent of this project was to challenge the historically held assumptions in the U.S. education system about the prescription of knowledge through a static perspective. Despite a disappointing outcome in this instance, authenticity from a learner perspective using web-based content continues to have promise. This University recognized that contemporary society exists within a global, technologically connected environment in which most learning is personalized. They also recognized that does not always take place within the classroom and draws from diverse and sometimes extreme perspectives. As such, it was believed that structured learning should incorporate strategies to develop life-long learning skills. With the potential to develop a learner-centered environment that draws upon the uniqueness of the individual (Bedford, Wiebe, & Tschida, 2008) it has the potential to lead to deep, meaningful learning outcomes (Biggs, 1999). This approach would foster a sense of authenticity around perspectives that are meaningful to individual learners, nurture the skills within the learner to differentiate among them, and prepare the learners to interact within a 21st Century society. Although flawed in its execution, the evaluation outcomes of this project add to the body of knowledge regarding our assumptions about authenticity in the contemporary classroom. Efforts to be authentic in beliefs about how the content transforms a learner as a person, an academic, and a professional can lead to a personal relationship with the content (Biggs, 1999) and positive learning outcomes. However, the support for authenticity in the acquisition of knowledge through a learner perspective as indicated through this inquiry reflects on the nature of the instructor’s own relationship with the content.

In order for the instructor to relinquish her control over the content, she must be comfortable with potential sources of that content, with her learners and with herself. It is clear that the path to authenticity in the learning environment needs to be led by an instructor who has developed her own sense of comfort with learner centered instruction. These considerations remove the authority and decision making from the traditional venues and create an environment in which learning can be a process that is individual, fluid and personal, yet maintain standards of accuracy, currency and quality.

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