

William Roberts
OMDE 607
7/31/07

Critical Reflection

Introduction

1969, two summers after the “Summer of Love”, it was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and in June I was handed my freshly minted Bachelor of Arts degree. In the fall in that year I began my first job – teaching. Now 38 years later I am still teaching and you would think that I should have mastered the trade by now. During this course I learned how much I had fallen into a routine, into thinking that the same thing always works. This course allowed me to question my methods and more importantly, this course allowed me to change those methods.

Take, for example, objectives. I was always intimidated by the idea of objectives since most of the ones that I had read – and written – were very ormolu and designed more to impress than to specify goals. I frequently found objectives very hard to understand. Thanks to a very comprehensive discussion by Morrison, Ross & Kemp, I feel more comfortable with objectives. I am relieved to know that objectives are not written in stone, that they are, in fact, a process that continues to evolve as the course develops. I was also relieved to learn that the Mager approach to writing objectives has been reconsidered in recent years. I had only been taught the Mager approach and I always had difficulty in defining the “overt response indicating mastery of the content.” (Morrison, Ross & Kemp, 2007, p.109.)

Analysis stage

I found the material on analysis to be somewhat overwhelming given the amount of analysis that needs to be done before a course design can be started. I tried to think if I had

actually done this type of analysis in previous classes and I realized that there is a considerable amount of analysis that is presented to the instructor by the institution. I know which classes are made up of undergraduates, and which classes are made up primarily of working adults. I always researched each student by looking at the courses the student had taken and the grades in each class. I looked to see what types of subjects were difficult for the student and in which ones the student excelled.

It was also at this point that I realized the connection between the subject that I teach, “Group Communication” and the theories that support Instructional Design. Particularly in reading Lebow’s discussion of constructivist values it seemed to me that there is a purist view of constructivism that may emasculate the concept. Further, I was puzzled by the vagueness and the deification of the system theory in education. Are there other perspectives of viewing educational theory, as in communication theory, such as the functional theory, interpretative symbolic, etc.? I fully agree with Lebow that “goals of education should not only include cognitive outcomes, but also affective ones.”(Lebow, 1994, p. 8)

It occurred to me while reading Burtis & Turman that the relationship between groups and learning is not obtuse. (Burtis & Turman, 2006, p. 46) Members of groups are interdependent and likewise we can think of the learning experience as a type of group experience. There is the learner, the tutor, the subject content, and peers. Learning then is a construction that is afforded by the union of these elements. All of this is affected by the suprasystems involved, institutions, families, jobs, etc. Johnson cites the Charles and Ray Eames film, *Powers of Ten*, in which the camera zooms from the Milky Way to earth, to Illinois, to a park in Chicago, to a man’s hand, then to the subatomic particles in the hand which look familiarly like the Milky Way. (Johnson, 2001, pp. 231-233). This dramatically shows how we

are interconnected simultaneously to supra- and sub- systems and the individual resides somewhere in between supra and sub universes. This leads me to believe that theories of grouping can be applied with relative ease to theories of learning. All are based in communication theory as I note in reading Littlejohn. Oh my, I am synthesizing, Bloom would be so proud.

Learning design

The learning design described by Morrison et al is particularly useful. I believe that the expanded performance-content matrix will be especially helpful in my planning of future courses. The matrix is a great way to focus the objectives of the course and relate the assignment materials to follow the map provided by the matrix. I have not determined if I fall into a 'neat' or a 'scruffie' category as Bates describes (Bates, 2003, p. 154) but I have come to appreciate how the systems approach can be particularly useful in designing distance education courses. As for evaluation, my project did not call for in depth evaluation since the students were not required to take the course and are only expected to either complete or not complete it. However, for future use I will refer to the textbook for decisions on how to more appropriately determine the competence of my students in other courses. Finally, I have often felt that the material I teach is somewhat arbitrary in addressing various topics. Therefore, our discussions and readings on sequencing were comforting. I have been able to rethink why topics in group communication should be offered in concept-related sequence posited by Posner and Strike (Morrison, 2006, p. 136). Concepts like power, leadership, and group conflict, might be addressed in any order but by examining these concepts in a sophistication sequence, the concepts can be offered in a more logical order: power, conflict, leadership.

The project

I found the project to put our course on Nighthawk to be a little disappointing. In my teaching experience I have used Blackboard and Angel. Both of these platforms offer a very wide range of useful tools. Particularly the assessment tools of both support a variety of testing methods. I did not find those functions in Nighthawk (WebTycho). The format of Nighthawk is very clean and straightforward but limited in its functionality.

As for the project itself, it always helps to actually put together a course in order to see its weaknesses. I will actually use this project as the basis for the course that I will offer on Blackboard at the University of Richmond this fall. I have been asked to present the concepts of this course at our fall meeting and to 'unveil' this course to the prospective online teachers.

Participation in discussions and in groups

I have noticed throughout the courses I have taken that discussions in the conferences takes on many different forms. I categorize myself as a passive learner. I read every posting but I do not add many posts on my own. The reason is that many responses are trivial in nature and, while pleasant, do not advance the conversation very much. I realize that I have made relatively few postings but I hope that the ones I have made will spark discussion, debate, or offer a new perspective on the topic of discussion.

As for the group work, it was very limited in this class and that is unfortunate. I felt that our group worked very well together and given more time could have produced a good group project or group paper.

Conclusion

In retrospect, I have learned to use a much more structured approach to designing my online classes as well as my classroom classes. More importantly, I feel better prepared to deal with my institution using the CLER Model as a means of 'selling' course ideas to the constituents at the University of Richmond who are aligned at various levels of support for the distance education program. In addition I have learned to use the ADDIE Model as a basis for guiding the design of my individual courses. The textbook and the additional readings provided in this course will become useful tools as I try to assist my institution in its emergence into the world of distance education.

Works Cited

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