

## Updating Learning Programmes II: Assumptions that form obstacles (DL in HE)

This is the second in a series of articles aimed at organisations and educational institutions who wish to overhaul existing learning programmes.

### Assumptions that form obstacles

There are often assumptions about teaching and learning embedded in university courses and programmes that can create obstacles to real innovation and change, especially for Distance Learning. These assumptions are best laid bare in order to understand if they are valid and shared by everyone involved in programme design and delivery.

Often assumptions that get in the way of positive changes are silent legacies, inherited from historical conceptions of educational processes and subtly passed on to students who in turn learn to assume that "this is the way things are". While the course designers and administrators may be open to new approaches, the teaching staff might be surprised by and resistant to the level of change required by them.

These tacit assumptions often include an emphasis on:

#### **Content over process**

This assumption holds that text and other materials that make up the content of the course are of primary importance, and students will take these away and learn them. We do not need to worry about the way students learn what we give them: it is their responsibility as adults to deal with this themselves.

#### **Transmission over shared knowledge-building**

This assumption holds that teachers, tutors and course designers are the founts of knowledge and students are there to absorb what they teach, memorise facts and ideas found in the textbooks and get steered towards correct answers. Students bring little or nothing of value to the course that might benefit either the content or the processes of learning.

#### **Individual over group learning**

This assumption, especially true in the Humanities disciplines, holds that learning has always primarily been about individual study. The lone student toils away in his or her room and only rarely interacts with other students. Learning is about listening to the teacher, reading texts and writing reports and essays, both of which are done alone and with maximum quiet concentration.

#### **Independence over support**

This assumption holds that DL requires a special type of student who can learn on his or her own without needing support beyond the rare contact with a tutor or programme coordinator to clarify a detail. It is a sign of weakness to ask for support, which might show the student to be unfit for the programme.

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In reality, studies\* show that:

### **Process requires as much attention as content**

The way students learn is as important as what they learn. There is no single right way to conduct university education, and many factors surrounding the subject, the students and the environment will fit some processes better than others. A range of different processes can spark and retain interest and provide a wide variety of students with at least some ways of learning that they prefer.

### **Students bring a wealth of knowledge to a course**

Shared knowledge-building helps to motivate and interest students and to bring improvement to programmes. Students are able to work with prior knowledge and push that further in practical and effective ways. Shared knowledge-building is a dynamic process that allows for immediate change and adaptation of programmes that may otherwise limp along until a formal review calls for revision of published materials.

### **Group learning motivates and engages students**

Similarly, group learning offers new ways for students to work with knowledge, learn from each other and push themselves further than the materials or their own readings will allow. Group learning bolsters students with peer support and working networks. It also opens up the possibility for new and creative assignments that may model the kind of teamwork they experience on the job.

### **Distance Learning can provide high standards of programme support**

Gone are the days of reliance on telephones and letters for contact between students, tutors and programme support teams. Online communities offer virtual classroom spaces and allow Distance Learning to take advantage of some of the best features of face-to-face learning, such as tutor-student contact. Poor tutor contact can stem from lack of clear expectations, training and/or remuneration for tutors – things that have nothing to do with learning and which have no place being embedded in the design of a programme.



If you have identified additional assumptions that form obstacles, please help by visiting my blog (<http://www.architela.com/blog/>) and offering more from your own vantage point.

Previous article in series:  
Updating Learning Programmes I: 10 First Principles

In the next article, I'll tackle some of the issues surrounding assessment.

\* Vermunt & Verloop, 1999; Gagne, 1970; Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Jacques & Salmon, 2007