ED 369 347   HE 027 386

AUTHOR   Lewis, Roger
TITLE   Quality Assurance in "New" Methods of Learning.
PUB DATE   16 Dec 93
NOTE   8p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Society
              for Research into Higher Education Conference
              (Brighton, England, United Kingdom, December 14-16,
              1993).
PUB TYPE   Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information
              Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position
              Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
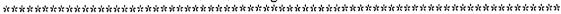DESCRIPTORS   Change Strategies; College Instruction; Delivery
              Systems; Educational Assessment; *Educational Change;
              Educational Environment; *Educational Innovation;
              Educational Methods; *Educational Quality; Foreign
              Countries; *Higher Education; *Quality Control;
              Standards; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT
          This paper, written from a British perspective, looks
at "new" methods of learning that are transforming higher education
teaching and learning and at some issues in quality control that
arise from these rapid changes. The author notes that in the past new
methods have often mistakenly been hailed as the panacea of current
educational problems but have been applied on a relatively small
scale. However, now though the innovations are not "new," they are
possible on a much larger scale and combine with many pressures on
higher education to create a significantly different learning
environment on an unprecedented scale. The pressures raise issues of
quality and set the agenda for a new kind of delivery in which
consistency is particularly important. In examining how changes will
be made on such a large scale the paper suggests that departments and
institutions, rather than individual teachers, will take greater
control of teaching methods. The new learning environment will
require seven specific components and seven specific changes outlined
in the paper. Regarding the question of funding, the paper suggests
that a public, coherent strategy must exist on which to make
judgements about the effectiveness of change. Established processes
are being challenged and new validation methods may be required.
(JB)

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN 'NEW' METHODS OF LEARNING

Roger Lewis, BP Professor of Learning Development, University of Humberside

First, a definition. What are the 'new' learning methods referred to in the title? The term is an umbrella for a wide range of approaches, some involving the application of technology (as in computer based learning and automated assessment), some the use of specially-designed learning materials (as in open learning), some the use of 'semi'- or 'non'-professional sources of support (such as peers and mentors).

You will notice that I have placed the word 'new' in quotation marks. This is deliberate. No one single method is strictly-speaking 'new': they have all been used before. The trappings of the technology are admittedly sometimes new: CD players simply were not in use 25 years ago. But even here the **applications** the technology is put to are not necessarily new: their main benefit is to enable individuals to do things more easily, quickly or comprehensively than earlier technology made possible. Quote a supposed innovation - whatever its form - and you will find someone, somewhere who has tried it before.

I shall, though, argue that the scale of use of these 'new' methods is potentially dramatically different from previous uses. The impetus creating this new situation is the combined set of forces currently acting on HE. These could be said to require a transformation of existing methods of teaching and learning. How can a new learning environment be created, and its quality assured?

The method as the panacea

The records of SRHE conferences and publications, and those of similar organisations such as the Association of Education and Training Technology, show that individual teachers in universities and colleges have always experimented with new methods. Such innovations usually cluster under whatever label is fashionable at the time The label may suggest a particular physical location, for example the resource centre or language laboratory; or a technology, such as the teaching machine or computer. New methods are espoused for a variety of reasons: sometimes efficiency and learning effectiveness (as with programmed learning); sometimes flexibility of delivery (as with distance learning); sometimes to develop learner choice and autonomy (as with open or independent learning).

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Each wave of innovation may be successively proclaimed by its exponents as the solution to whatever are the current challenges - as a panacea. So it is easy to see why experienced teachers with a touch of cynicism, can dismiss such innovations with 'I've seen it all before' or 'Wasn't this called something different ten years ago?', thereby confirming their decision to sit tight and refrain from putting energy into yet another passing fad.

Characteristics of previous innovations

So what characterises such 'new' methods? First, they tend to be used by enthusiastic teachers who wish to innovate, for example to resolve the difficulties their students encounter, or through a professional commitment to develop good practice. Typically, the methods are applied on a small-scale, within the curriculum area in which the individual teacher operates - often a peripheral area, where an alternative approach can do little damage. Thus the innovation is optional - the individual teacher **chooses** to undertake it; it is desirable rather than essential - existing practice could continue without it. Indeed, colleagues of the innovator may well resist the new method, consciously or unconsciously limiting its impact within a department.

This calls attention to the environment in which innovation occurs. New learning methods are the choice of an individual teacher rather than the department - even less of the institution. Central units whose remit is to encourage innovation, such as educational methods or staff development units may exist, but these are usually weak and isolated - however able their staff. The decision to innovate thus remains the decision of each individual teacher, acting in an environment of 'academic freedom'. Not surprisingly, innovation tends as a result to be patchy and limited in institutional impact.

The current requirement for innovation

The argument of this paper is that HE is now subject to the combined pressure of a range of different challenges. Together, these create a significantly different environment, requiring innovation in teaching and learning on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The challenges can be summarised quickly, as they are now familiar.

* Dramatically increased numbers: expansion between 1988-9 and 1992- was equivalent to the creation of 20 large civic universities. Excluding the Open University, one million UK and EC students studied at universities in the UK in 1992-3, compared to less than 700,000 in 1988-9.

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* The intake of students from diverse backgrounds, often without a history of HE, including more 'mature' students, students from minority groups, international students (such as those on exchange from universities abroad).

* A falling rate of per capita income, leading to a requirement for increased cost effectiveness and productivity.

* Diverse expectations of the outcomes of HE: from their teachers that students will operate competently within academic fields, from employers that graduates will possess 'transferable' skills; from the government that a contribution will be made to the country's economic effectiveness.

* Student demands for 'quality' in the HE environment generally and in particular in the ways in which their learning is managed and supported.

* Demands from other stakeholders for value for money and 'quality'.

A new kind of learning delivery

These pressures raise issues of quality generally, and, in particular, set the agenda for a new kind of delivery. Logically, learning methods need to meet the following criteria.

* To support the learning of larger numbers of students than ever before, sometimes, under semesterisation and new structures such as accelerated degrees, within less contact time.

* To meet the needs of students from a wide variety of backgrounds, and with differing experience and abilities.

* To be demonstrably cost effective.

* To help students develop a range of competences.

* To create a learning environment which students accept as of sufficient quality.

* To provide consistent outputs across a range of different learning locations.

The last criterion is an interpretation of the point made earlier about stakeholders' demands. One important aspect of 'quality' is consistency. This applies across a number of dimensions, including:

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- in assessment arrangements within an institution
- in assessment arrangements across institutions
- in the operation of credit transfer and the accreditation of prior learning
- in opportunities for all students to access resources.

Current developments make consistency particularly important. The same academic programmes may be delivered across different sites of the same university, within franchised colleges across the UK, and in partner institutions internationally. The 'home' university has to assure identical standards in each location, each time the programme is delivered; including the range, quality and accessibility of support provided to students.

A corporate response

How is the new kind of learning delivery to be developed? The models of innovation described earlier are inadequate. There will always be individual professionals with the energy, imagination and enthusiasm to innovate, whatever the external environment. But change on the scale required is beyond the individual, and beyond the individual department. The point is well-put in the MacFarlane Report:

'as departments, and even institutions, assume a greater sense of collective ownership over courses...the question of the most efficient, effective or appropriate teaching methods will no longer be a matter for decision by a single teacher'. (1)

The Report goes on to give examples of how this stronger central role will be worked out in practice, including the use by academics of learning materials and technological applications developed outside their own institutions.

A new learning environment

Part of an institution's response to the pressures relates to the kind of learning environment it will resource. In the past, small-scale experimentation in new learning methods has taken place within a physical environment unsuited to innovation. This has not mattered: the enthusiasm of the individual teacher, infectiously communicated to his or her students, can overcome uncongenial buildings or a lack of equipment.

The traditional learning environment is well known, and still largely in place. The student is required to attend set spaces at set times to be taught

(as in lecture theatres and seminar rooms) or to learn in fixed resource centres (as in libraries and laboratories).

The new learning environment will need at least the following components:

- different uses of space (buildings; equipment)
- new applications of technology
- specially-designed learning materials
- changes in staffing arrangements
- more appropriate strategies for communicating within the institution
- more flexible academic structures
- sharper, more targeted assessment arrangements.

Change needs to operate at the levels of teacher, student, course and institution: all are important. In the space of this paper it is possible to suggest only some indicative changes:

- the creation of learning resource centres or areas, designed to support individual study and small-group peer learning
- the use of technology to present learning material, to assess the quality of the student's interaction with it, to manage student learning paths and to enable individual students to communicate at a distance with a tutor and/or other students
- the use of specially-developed resource packages to support learning away from the frequent presence of a teacher
- the development of new types of post, such as 'learning adviser' and 'demonstrator' with responsibilities that include the direct support of student learning; new roles for academics, such as producing the learning materials referred to above; the convergence of library and computing centre staff
- the development of modular/unitised programme structures, built around learning outcomes; credit accumulation and transfer systems, and arrangements for the accreditation of prior learning
- the development of 'new' assessment methods, including the use of computer technology and peer judgement
- conscious fostering in students of greater confidence, and articulateness about how they learn.

Go into any HE institution today and you will find parts of the picture in place. Some institutions have focused on academic structure; others on changing the physical environment; yet others have made progress on the preparation of learning materials. What you will rarely if ever find is an institution that has made even and sufficient progress on all fronts, and on the essential underpinning cultural change.

Usually, and significantly, least progress has been made in the staffing area. Yet the support of staff is crucial to the success of innovation. And this support has to come at a time when staff feel insecure, confronted with the need to change, but in ways that are apparently uncertain. It seems easier to erect a new building costing many millions of pounds than to tackle such staffing issues. Staff development, whilst often quoted as important, is rarely costed into the design of new learning methods. Such development has to address the question 'why' as well as 'how', to shift acceptance beyond the small group of enthusiasts.

All the above ingredients are crucial to the new learning environment. If just one is missing, the picture will be incomplete: for example, the newest and best-equipped building will fail if the staff within it are working unwillingly or inappropriately.

Funding by project

One way in which experimentation in learning methods has been encouraged has been through selective institutional funding. Teaching and learning committees, or educational development units, allocate relatively small sums to support innovation. This provides the resource component an individual academic often needs. Such a route is still a good way to foster change; though not all projects can be expected to succeed, as innovators must be allowed to take some risks.

But, if the earlier argument is accepted, the stakes are now much higher. The funder is entitled to ask: how will this project contribute to the creation of the desired learning environment, for example in developing materials, or structures, capable of wider use? And how will the findings be disseminated? To take this stance does, of course, require a public and coherent strategy for the introduction of new learning methods, against which the judgements can be made.

Quality

How can the quality of new methods be assured? One response is to ask whether any special arrangements for such methods are in fact needed. Existing validation processes purport, after all, to cover course design, delivery and assessment. Established processes, however, are themselves coming under increasing scrutiny and question.

The onus is, of course, always on the new to prove itself. Even manifestly unsuccessful 'old' methods of teaching and assessment are allowed to continue unscathed. (2) The innovator is required to justify changes from

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the norm. Tighter, tougher criteria for success may be needed for new methods. Thus a project to test out, say, a new use of technology may be expected to set out target outcomes in advance and to collect data to show the extent to which these have been reached, and at what cost.

Some components of the 'new' learning environment may require the development of 'new' validation methods. Take learning materials, for example. Materials used to support traditional teaching are either ready-published, familiar and reviewed or are ephemeral creations of the teacher's - handouts, booklists. The new learning environment will require learning materials of a different order, such as those under the labels 'open' or 'flexible' materials, specially-designed to support remote learning. If these are published internally, what additional procedures may be needed to assure their quality? At least one institution is considering the potential role of BS 5750 in this connection. Such a standard would help meet the increased expectation that delivery methods should be underpinned by accessible and verifiable policies and standards, rendering explicit and public what is all too often left implicit and private. Is there any reason why such a standard could not, in principle, be extended to the operation of the whole learning environment, including course validation, delivery systems and student support? (The cost implications of enhanced quality systems need, of course, to be considered.)

One final point. If HE institutions take up the strategic challenges current circumstances dictate, the 'quality' of 'new' learning methods can be viewed more broadly. One aspect of quality is fitness for purpose. Self-evidently, the main purpose of new learning methods is to foster learning, and this needs to be assured. More specific outcomes, and appropriate assessment methods, would greatly help us do this. But the new methods have a further purpose too: to contribute to the learning environment envisioned by the institution. In the longer term, this structural and strategic contribution also needs to be assured.

References

(1) Teaching and Learning in an Expanding Higher Education System (The MacFarlane Report), Committee of Scottish University Principals, 1992

(2) Assessment Issues in Higher Education, Department of Employment, March 1993