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ABSTRACT
                This issues paper, the third in a series of eight, is
intended to distill formative evaluation questions on topics that are central
to the development of the higher and further education information
environment in the United Kingdom. The sets of ideas about "good" learning in
issues papers 1 and 2 are no longer the private preserve of psychologists and
educational theorists, but are beginning to enter into the thinking and
conversation of teachers in higher education. The practice and discourse of
learning and teaching in higher education is beginning to shift toward a more
student-centered model in which the learner's cognitive activity (what the
learner does) is acknowledged to be more important than teachers' historic
preoccupations about syllabus coverage. The shift from teaching as the
transmission of knowledge to teaching as the facilitation of learning has
implications for the role of the teacher and for the creator of instructional
resources. The focus can no longer be on creating learning resources without
regard to their intended contexts. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

Changing Conceptions of Teaching in UK HE:
Some Implications for DNER Projects

EDNER Project

Issues Paper 3

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Changing conceptions of teaching in UK HE: some implications for DNER projects

Changing conceptions of teaching

The sets of ideas about 'good learning' sketched in Issues papers 1 and 2 can no longer be regarded as the private preserve of psychologists and educational theorists. They are beginning to figure in the talk, thinking and practice of teachers in higher education. Without straining credulity, it is reasonable to argue that the practice and discourse of learning and teaching in higher education is shifting towards a more student-centered model, in which the learner's cognitive activity (what the learner does) is acknowledge to be much more important than teachers' historic pre-occupations about syllabus coverage (Gibbs, 1996; Hartley, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Educational technology development projects need to take this into account – especially if they have a three to five year lead-time between conceptualisation and serious roll-out. Designing for the past is not a defensible option.

The shift towards student-centered learning

Empirical research into higher education lecturers' conceptions of, and approaches to, teaching is becoming a very active research area. There is still too little broad-based quantitative data to generalise about the scale and speed of a shift towards more student-centered views and methods (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002). However, some of the smaller-scale qualitative research which has been published allows us to get a sense of some of the key differences which can be found within teachers' shifting conceptions of teaching. Kember & Kwan (2000), for example, identify two main conceptions of teaching, each of which consists of two subsidiary conceptions. These are summarised in table 1 below.

Some of the implications of the analysis summarised in table 1, for some DNER L&T projects, are as follows:

*   projects may run the risk of mixing some of the assumptions underpinning the first and fourth conceptions (in the right-hand column of the table). That is, they work to an image of a student seen as both a consumer of information and an autonomous learner. Projects are may be silent (agnostic?) about what (cognitively) is to be done with the information and may have a rather weak sense of what is involved in intellectual autonomy (as opposed to just a freedom to browse).
*   projects may be silent (agnostic?) about the role of the teacher; teachers may be important influencers, gatekeepers or intermediaries; if so, their conceptions of learning and teaching will be important in affecting how their students make use of DNER. Lack of a clear image of how technology, teacher and learner will fit together may well reduce uptake.

Teaching as transmission of knowledge	Teachers holding this conception tend to see teaching as a teacher-centered activity; the main aim being to transmit knowledge to students, who are considered as passive recipients of information	Teaching as passing information	Teaching is merely passing information to students; emphasis on **syllabus coverage** or meeting exam requirements, without much concern for students' understanding
		Teaching as making it easier for students to understand	Teaching is still conceived of as the transmission of knowledge but now with a concern for students' understanding; emphasis on **structuring** knowledge & organising teaching to help students understand, remember and apply
Teaching as the facilitation of learning	Teachers holding this conception tend to see teaching as student-centered; the main aim being to facilitate their learning	Teaching as meeting students' learning needs	The emphasis here shifts to the variety of students and the **diversity** of their learning needs; teaching is informed by a sense of responsibility about meeting these various needs
		Teaching as helping students become independent learners	The focus here is on the growth of the individual, rather than on specific knowledge and skills. Teaching is seen as a process of helping learners develop intellectually and become **autonomous** lifelong learners

Table 1: Conceptions of teaching (adapted from Kember & Kwan, 2000)

A broader paradigm shift in teaching and educational design

Table 2 broadens the scope of the change a little further.

From	To
Information transmission	Design of learning tasks and environments
'Teacher' directed	Learner-managed learning
Subject-centered	Learner-centered design & development
Individualistic learning	Learning communities
Inert knowledge	Usable knowledge
Atomistic, technology-focused approaches	Holistic/systemic approaches

Table 2: The broader paradigm shift in higher education

Taking each of the rows in table 2 in turn:

The shift from teaching as the transmission of knowledge to teaching as the facilitation of learning has implications for the role of the teacher. While lecturing may remain important, it loses ground relative to the design of learning tasks and learning environments as a focus of the teacher's concern. Teachers spend proportionately more time designing useful learning tasks and identifying and improving access to good learning resources.

This shift in role parallels a shift in the acknowledged locus of control over student learning. While teachers continue to occupy a powerful position, through making judgements about what counts as worthwhile knowledge and through grading students' work, students are gaining power in a number of ways. As consumers in a buyer's market, they can exert financial pressure on institutions, departments and courses which do not appear to be offering them what they want or need. As emerging 'autonomous learners' they take greater control of the local details of their learning activity.

Partly as a response to relative increases in the power of the learner and partly due to various factors which are weakening the grip of traditional university disciplines, teaching and educational design are shifting away from a content or subject-centered philosophy (however implicit) and towards a more explicit centering upon the needs of learners. This trend is given greater momentum by acknowledgement of the increasing diversity of students in UK HE, including acknowledgement that the pedagogies which may have served in an elite system are no longer satisfactory in a mass system of HE.

UK HE teaching has long reflected notions of the learner as lone scholar and the learner as a novice member of an academic community. Both images hold some truth and both have influenced the practice and discourse of teaching and learning. They are interpreted in different ways, from time to time and place to place, and they do shift in their influence and status. Among recent manifestations of these two images, one can recognise both the idea of the student as unfettered consumer in a global supermarket of educational produce and the idea of learning as essentially social – as collaboration within a wired and/or walled community. The learner as powerful individualistic consumer is the more dominant image in national and EU policy documents. The learner as active member of a vibrant learning community is

the more dominant (if optimistic) image in recent writing by educational technologists.

The shift from inert to usable knowledge is contestable, of course. No-one will own up to teaching inert knowledge, but we all hear echoes of A.N. Whitehead's phrase about this being the greatest problem besetting university education. More to the point, we can see the benefits of better accounts of what makes knowledge useful and usable – we have a better understanding of how isolated fragments of decontextualised academic knowledge can give way to the forms of personal practical knowledge – 'working knowledge' - that allow someone to act and make a difference (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Sgouropoulou et al, 2000; Goodyear, 2000a & b).

Finally, Table 2 shows a shift from educational design practices that limit themselves to piecemeal innovation around specific technologies towards more holistic and systemic approaches. The focus can no longer be upon creating learning resources without regard to their intended contexts if use – the vagaries of implementation, 'roll-out', 'take up', institutionalisation and transfer (etc) are now better understood and seen for what they are – the hard and important parts of the problem of educational change, not some awkward residual details (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998).

References and further reading

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EDNER Key Issues papers are intended to distil formative evaluation questions on topics which are central to the development of the UK's higher and further education Information Environment. They are presented as short check-lists of key questions and are addressed to developers and practitioners. Feedback to the EDNER team is welcomed.

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