

Making the familiar strange: a basic business degree with a PBL ethos

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When we embarked on the process of responding to senior management demands for a distinctive business degree for a small inter-disciplinary campus, we took the familiar curriculum and searched for a distinctive, though not necessarily novel, approach to learning. This paper sets out the gestation and delivery of that distinctive degree which was designed as a whole rather than in modular format, and which had problem-based learning principles (Barrows and Tamblin 1980, Savery and Duffy 1995) at its heart. When “making the familiar strange” (Rosaldo 1989) the point is to see what happened, what new insights resulted and how it changed the process and practice of learning and teaching. We therefore attempt in this paper to do exactly that in order to determine whether anything distinctive did result, and what, if anything, can be gleaned from the experience by the institution in relation to future course design. The designers of this course faced considerable opposition through the validation phase of this degree, since it lay outside the standard paradigm of what constituted, in the traditional mind, a normal undergraduate course. Problem or task-based learning was the ethos of the whole design, meaning that students were thrown into the deep end of task and client response not as a result of foundation learning but before it had happened. Combinations of units were designed to build the appetite for learning before serving appropriate models and concepts, which meant high levels of student attendance and engagement and different work patterns for staff. Institutional challenges included small credit units, lack of transferability to other courses, the need for generalist teachers and examiners as well as specialists and considerable staff team development. The location of the campus meant a new agenda of local business engagement which was largely driven by teaching staff in forging new business community relationships. Without the considerable goodwill from local business organisations, the course would have lacked sufficient authentic tasks and challenges for the students to tackle. Technology for learning was vital to the process and the virtual learning environment, e-portfolio software for groupwork, reflective work and formative and summative assessment, online testing, online feedback, video lectures, class open polling, weekly podcasts with student co-editors, digital reading lists, student video minutes of group meetings and online business games were some of the ways in which learning technology supported the course design. The course aimed to treat students as apprentice professionals rather than periodical attenders; people who were responsible for their and their peers’ development and who would experience a broad range of practical business experiences, developing not just a set of academic skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation but also creative communication and organizational skills which would support them in their careers. The paper shows how many of these aims were indeed met, yet the course itself failed. The course was closed after one cohort, as it failed to recruit sufficient students to the campus, and, although it could integrate with other institutional offers in the business domain on the campus, precisely because of its distinctive design could not transfer successfully to the main campus where the paradigm for undergraduate education was quite different in size and shape. There are some practical reasons for the failure to recruit, specifically to do with branding and location, but there are also some ideas developed in the learning and teaching experience of this course which could transfer successfully to other business teaching. The paper aims to bring out these lessons in order to ensure that the closure of one course does not close down innovative approaches to business course design and in

particular problem-based learning approaches to learning and assessment. References: Barrows HS, Tamblyn, R. Problem-Based Learning: An Approach to Medical Education. New York: Springer, 1980. Rosaldo, R. (1989) Culture and Truth, Boston: Beacon Press Savery, J.R., & Duffy, T.M. (1995). Problem-based learning: An instructional model and its constructivist framework. In B. Wilson (Ed.), Constructivist learning environments: Case studies in instructional design (pp. 135-148). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

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