

POSTSCRIPT

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Introduction

I was asked to sum up the day, in some way, while the delegates who remained consumed their canapés and sipped their wine. I approached this, in the spirit of the acronym for the day, by following LICK with CHEW – standing for “*Carrying Home Experts’ Wisdom*”. Needless to say, it was the wisdom of the speakers and participants which I had in mind, not my own! This is a brief summary of my postscript.

Outline

I took as my theme the approach followed by Stephen Brookfield in some of his lectures. He would commence by telling his students the question which he intended to address and why he thought it important; and he then concluded by asking them what question that had raised in *their* mind, and what they proposed to do to find an answer. I warned my audience that I would do the same.

- I stressed that questioning and its application by students had mattered to me ever since I first read Postman and Weingartner. I had warmed to the suggestion that the measure of someone’s education and thinking is not what they know, but the quality of the questions they ask.
- So my structure for this short input would be to declare the five questions I had brought with me to the events of the day, to outline why I thought them important, to report what progress I had made in finding answers, to mention *en passant* the questions which might have been posed during the day, but had not – the dogs that did not bark in the night – and then to move on to the questions which *I* was taking away home with me (quite a sentence!).
- I freely admitted the wisdom of the old saying – that any fool can ask a question which it takes a wise man (*sic*) to answer. So I felt equipped to question, and favoured by a gathering able to answer.

Question 1: How far should learning go beyond the assimilation of content?

Although I have enthused about many aspects of his writing, I confess that Curt Bonk has often worried me by his emphasis on “delivering the content” through and in e-learning. That concept, like much of John Biggs’ writing, concentrates on the first three levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, if you use that form of categorisation. I’m afraid that I feel that IT has taken over much of the delivery, handling and use of content and the routine application of basic methodologies which used to be the remit of graduates – and that the real demands in HE nowadays are to develop graduates who have analytical and evaluative abilities, are creative problem-solvers, and have sophisticated interpersonal skills. I was hoping that these more pedagogically challenging, as well as more relevant and useful, outcomes, would figure in our programme.

Yet I noted that content featured a great deal in what Betty Collis had to say; and that Martin Oliver also spoke of the co-creation of knowledge. I wondered if the title for the day had seduced us to steer clear of higher level objectives. I was heartened when a questioner in the first session rightly (in my judgement) raised the issue of preparing students to use important skills.

So I came back to my engineer's emphasis on developing abilities. I was listening as the day progressed for discussion and reporting of the development of abilities, and of achieving affective goals, but I didn't hear much of that. However I still had in my mind the questions raised by Martin Oliver, which I did not dare to paraphrase, but which went quite some way to giving us something to chew on under the heading of levels and domains.

Question 2: Do we do enough to recognise and nurture *unexpected learning outcomes*?

It has troubled me for a while that our current educational practice, which almost amounts to an obsession, is to specify and concentrate in an aligned way on expected learning outcomes, and has almost excluded the possibility of totally unexpected learning outcomes. Yet I keep encountering them, and being pleased for the learners for whom such learning has occurred. There are the wonderful skills which can develop while the learner is in pursuit of the scheduled outcomes. There are the rich rewards which come from wandering down an attractive sidetrack, increasingly found in internet searching. There are even interpersonal skills which emerge from planned and unplanned group activity. My students keep reporting such learning, and their pride and pleasure in it – which I share. I instanced the woman working with me on an Enquiry Skills module, who decided to optimise the multi-tasking for which her female brain, with its greater number of connections between its hemispheres, was better suited than is mine; and who demonstrated objectively in due course that she had succeeded in her aim.

In recent years, I have persuaded some of my programme team colleagues to add a blank learning outcome at the end of the lists in our module specifications:

"Any outcome which is in accordance with the goals of this module or programme, but not covered in the above list".

We then find a source of marks, bonus marks, with which such learning can be recognised and rewarded. When I mention this eccentric approach in academic company, I note that more than a third of those gathered nod agreement - and that there is almost a competition to contribute, in terms which begin: "I had an example of that recently, when..."

During the day, I found many mentions of such outcomes, and even of demands from speakers for diversifying learning to include them; but as yet hardly anything of schemes for properly recognising unplanned outcomes. I needed to think more about that. Maybe you do, too?

Question 3: Do we make enough use of self- and peer-assessment?

It seems difficult nowadays to avoid mentioning concern for assessment in higher education. In the context of the day, I found it fairly easy, and I hope appropriate, to let a familiar bee out of my bonnet.

Betty Collis had warned us early on that "assessment remains a real challenge". This would not come as anything new to an audience familiar with the fact that assessment which does not reward or encourage what the teachers claim to value is perhaps the greatest weakness in British higher education. I mentioned that, any time I am asked for advice from a newly appointed auditor, external examiner or reviewer in the UK system, I advise them to look at the module boxes, check assessed outcomes against declared outcomes, and begin to enquire about the marked differences which I can almost guarantee they will quickly find.

Carrying forward my concern for higher level abilities from my first question, I mentioned that I am acutely aware that higher level abilities cannot be judged from full information about performance - without the involvement of the learner. Often only the learner knows if a creative performance is original to a breathtaking extent, or an adaptation of something encountered elsewhere and (rightly) admired, or repetition of an earlier creative effort.

Given the pedagogical desirability of self-assessment, and the cost-effectiveness as well as the proven pedagogical power of formative peer-assessment, both seem remarkably neglected and under-used in the sector at present. The possibility of harnessing them was raised mildly from the floor by a few participants, but I felt it could profit from more attention - soon and almost urgently. I hoped that by airing it, and by arguing the case, I might have planted the question in the minds of a few of those listening.

Question 4: Are our curriculum developments evaluated systematically and objectively?

Over the years, many colleagues have told me that they can tell when a class, even a new activity, has gone well, because you get a "gut reaction" to that effect. When I have asked how they tell the difference between a gut reaction and indigestion, their consequent annoyance often tells its own story.

In a context where so much is changing so rapidly, with the advent of IT and otherwise, methods and approaches are seldom the same as four or five years ago. Changes in the curriculum are often radical as well as rapid, and their impact on learning can often only be anticipated speculatively. Yet we operate now in an age where annual and periodic review are a feature of the scene, and where each such review is expected to be soundly evidence-based. It behoves us, then, to ingather data to inform our judgements and claims about the effectiveness of the innovations which we pilot. Given the attendant risks, the practice of ensuring that students have the security of a "safety net" lest the innovation does not deliver as hoped, is also surely desirable.

As an innovator, provision of safety nets has always been a feature of my first steps into new educational territory. However, during the day, I did not encounter planned safety nets, and on the one occasion when I raised the possibility as a desirability, I did not encounter an empathic reaction. Yet, again in the first session, Betty Collis had reminded us that new developments "are not easy, first time round" (for staff or students). One participant then asked "So what if the innovation fails?" - without receiving adequate advice during the day. In his challenging study of reasonably competent and experienced teachers

engaged in e-moderation, Panos Vlachopoulos reported much to be learnt from mistakes in e-moderation, and the occurrence of many mistakes to be learnt from. Happily there were bright spots as far as evaluation was concerned. Angela Benzies and Jane McDowell described an iterative development, in a commendable partnership between an information scientist and an academic, where there had been delightfully systematic and purposeful formative evaluation.

Overall, though, during a day which concentrated a great deal on innovation and change, formative and summative evaluation, and means of collecting useful data, were seldom mentioned. I was left asking if we give this priority enough attention.

Question 5: How should teaching contribute to self-directed learning?

In situations where the learning is self-directed and fostered in learning communities, what is the role for teachers, once the plans have been made and communicated to learners? To put it bluntly, are we needed? Linda Creanor reported a student as saying "technology is only as good as the teacher that's behind it". Hamish Macleod and colleagues wrote of the "orchestration of experience and interaction". How can or do we discharge that remit?

I joyed while wrestling with this dilemma to find what was for me the greatest gem in the day's collection and offerings. This was Steve Draper's paper on "*Learning and Community*". In this, he identifies our teaching role, today and tomorrow, in a visionary and inspiring way, even if under what I felt was the regrettable title of "teacher monitoring".

So what questions did I take with me for the journey home and thereafter?

I had made progress with the questions on my original list, as I hope I have indicated; but they still remained, with amendments and enlargements. To these I added:

- Martin Oliver's issue regarding the two perspectives (see his paper, in which he does more justice to this than could I);
- A sneaking concern expressed in a question which developed for me through the day, as I related back to my absent colleagues and their priorities and practices: "How typical are we of the sector, its concerns and its progress?"
- Finally, in a climate where more and more teachers advocate group working, interaction and social-constructivism, I'm troubled to sort out: "At what point does or even must deep understanding become self-created and personal?"

I dwelt for a short time on that last question, airing experiences in which my studies of problem-solving students had revealed their need in the end to summarise and apply their approach in terms of highly personal metaphors and similes with which few if any peers, or tutors, could identify.

As I had promised, I then urged the remaining audience to consider, before tackling the serious task of whisky tasting, what questions *they* would be taking away with *them*, and what they would propose to do about seeking answers. In

a setting where acronyms were popular, I struggled to find yet another expansion of "LICK", and could only overwork the letter "K" (as is so often done nowadays), and suggested feebly:

Let Inquiries Continue Kreatively!