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Benchmark yourself: Self-reflecting about online teaching

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Teachers need effective online teaching and course development skills to engage higher education students in meaningful, socially contextual, challenging and engaging learning experiences. To develop these skills, academic teaching staff typically attend professional learning activities, such as workshops to investigate online learning and strategies, engage in one-to-one consultations with online learning experts, and analyse practical exemplars. Online teacher/designers are often perplexed by the transitional conundrums between the modes of on-campus and online teaching, and grapple with how to endow online learning contexts with the same qualities of good on-campus learning contexts. Many online teachers and designers of online courses are self-taught whereas others rely on institutionally-provided courses, workshops and seminars to extend their online teaching skills. This paper reports on a utilisation-focused evaluation methodology (Patton, 1997) that was adopted to develop a self-reflection rubric tool to guide academic teaching staff in the evaluation of their own online teaching and course development skills.

Keywords: online teaching, self reflection, rubric, benchmarking, professional learning

The quality of online teaching

Are you a good online teacher? What makes you a good online teacher? Can you design an engaging online course? How would you know if you had designed a meaningful, challenging and engaging online course? How do you devise online learning environments that are socially contextual and imbibe humanistic qualities for both the teachers and the learners? These are some of the questions teachers in online or blended learning environments typically ask themselves.

The process of online teaching occurs within online environments which have been specifically designed for student learning to occur. A good online learning and teaching environment requires essentially the same qualities that exist in on-campus contexts, but the difficulties for teaching staff often lie with the successful transition between the two modes. Effective online teachers aim to improve their abilities in the art of transition

by developing their own online teaching skills through a range of resources (Bright, 2007). To develop engaging online learning environments, teachers may utilise professional learning opportunities via workshops, pedagogical guidelines or exemplar courses, some of which promote the process of self-reflection and self-evaluation (Bell & Gayle, 2009). As it is with on-campus teaching, the process of reflecting on one's own online teaching and course development skills can engender a critical awareness of the characteristics of high quality learning environments. However, without some guidance as to what to reflect upon, the new or developing online teacher may face difficulties. Benchmarks may be required. It is not that online learning contexts require new and unique qualities, but rather ways in which to effectively bring these qualities from an on-campus to an online environment. To guide teachers in their design and teaching of online courses, a number of frameworks, guidelines and principles have been created (Herrington, Oliver, & Herrington, 2007; Kerns et al., 2005; Salmon, 2004; Van Duzer, 2002). Nevertheless, the quality of online teaching is also contextual; dependent upon the institution's staff, students, resources, values and goals. To promote the development of effective online course development and teaching skills, an institution would be best served by acknowledging advice from online learning experts *and* by tailoring such advice into a locally developed tool, designed to guide academic teaching staff in the self-directed evaluation of their own course development and teaching skills.

Background

The initial design of the MOOBRIC was driven by Avondale College of Higher Education's desire to provide reflective assistance to its staff and to move towards a better understanding of online learning within its particular educational niche. This change of direction enabled the institution to respond to changing demands of its students and staff.

Avondale College of Higher Education is a private, not-for-profit Higher Education Provider (HEP) of tertiary education in a Christian context. Avondale's educational delivery emphasises the balanced development of the whole person, including the intellectual, social, physical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of the self. Its education is centred in ethical values, and seeks to inspire students with a vision of global and community service to make the world a better place. The demand for values-based higher education of the kind offered at Avondale is demonstrated by enrolment growth of over 50% since 2004.

Avondale's emphasis on high ethical standards is evidenced in documentation at all levels of the organisation. For example, a stated Graduate Attribute is that students possess high ethical standards including an orientation to service. This emphasis on high ethical standards is further evidenced in each School and Faculty's strategic plan with each unit outline including at least one outcome directly related to ethics. Further, all students in undergraduate coursework programs, whether in the Arts, Humanities, Education, Nursing, Science or Theology typically complete at least three units specifically concerned with ethical standards and related themes. These units are available in face-to-face and online mode and all teaching staff complete a self-reflection survey at the end of teaching period in which these units are delivered.

Avondale is seeking to extend its reputation for teaching quality via the development and application of innovative approaches to teaching and learning that include adopting best practice approaches in the use of appropriate technologies in program delivery. The initial development of a rubric tool that can be used to self-reflect on and self-evaluate one's online teaching and course development skills provides one current example of innovative teaching practices being explored by a number of teaching academics at Avondale.

This paper reports on the initial development of a rubric tool that can be used to self-reflect on and self-evaluate one's online teaching and course development skills. The rubric tool is intended to be both educative (assessment *for* learning) and evaluative (assessment *of* learning). Since the institution for which this rubric was developed uses Moodle as a Learning Management System, the rubric is termed a "MOOBRIC".

Development of the MOOBRIC

The MOOBRIC has been developed using a utilisation-focused evaluation methodology (Patton, 1997) which enabled the intended users of this tool to initiate and contribute to its development. The researchers became facilitators of the evaluation process which led to the construction of the MOOBRIC. The aim of the rubric is to provide a benchmark by which online teaching and course development at Avondale can be developed and evaluated. The development process of the MOOBRIC was driven by the needs of the academic teaching staff of the institution who requested guidance on how to recognise the qualities of an effectively designed online

course and how to teach at a high quality within such courses. Teaching staff typically asked how to “marry a spontaneous teaching style with online learning that appears structured, static, frozen” and how to “replicate the warmth of the face-to-face classroom”. Based on recent research conducted at Avondale (Northcote, Beamish, Reynaud, Martin, & Gosselin, 2010), effective online courses at this institution were deemed to be those that enable both the personalisation and humanisation of teaching and learning processes (Hudson, 2002; Jacobson, 1993; Keough, 2005) within a social community where the expression of teacher and student personalities is welcomed (Paxton, 2003; Richardson & Swan, 2003). These qualities were incorporated into the MOOBRIC which aimed to articulate how such qualities could be operationalised and situational (Patton, 1994).

Feedback about the original version of the MOOBRIC was gathered from some of the main stakeholders in online education at the College: administration and key faculty teaching staff. This feedback indicated that descriptors for each level of the rubric needed to be more succinct and less reliant on the users’ understanding of educational terms. Furthermore, feedback at this initial stage provided confirmation that online courses at the College should continue to promote lifelong learning processes for both students and academic teaching staff.

The MOOBRIC is currently undergoing a second round of development, during which feedback data are being gathered from academic teaching staff at the College, colleagues from other national and international universities, and students enrolled at the College. These participants in the research process have been asked to provide feedback about the structure, content and functional application of the MOOBRIC. To date, feedback indicates that the MOOBRIC is valued for its potential as “a teaching tool for traditional classroom based academics moving to online environments” and for “getting staff to self assess and progress their development”. An ongoing evaluation cycle continues to guide the development of the MOOBRIC.

Function of the MOOBRIC

The MOOBRIC supports teachers with varying degrees of online teaching experience and expertise, from beginning through to advanced stages. The MOOBRIC design identifies three levels of expertise or stages of development: the “Muddler” (early stage), the “Meddler” (intermediate stage) and the “Moodler” (advanced stage). The overall structure of the MOOBRIC is based on Mishra and Koehler’s (2006) Framework for Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK). Drawing from this theoretical framework, the MOOBRIC includes statements describing the skills and pedagogical, content and technological knowledge effective online teachers and course designers could be expected to possess (see Figure 1).

| | | Muddler | Meddler | Moodler |
|----------|---------------------------------|---------|---|---------|
| 1 | PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE | | | |
| 1.1 | Learning activities | ← | Purpose, Alignment, Student-centredness, Engagement, Variety | → |
| 1.2 | Assessment and evaluation | ← | Information, Submission, Variety, Marking, Feedback, Evaluation | → |
| 1.3 | Communication and interaction | ← | Strategies, Facilitation, Community, Expectations, Monitoring | → |
| 1.4 | Support, guidance and mentoring | ← | Orientation, Guidance, Additional help, Trouble-shooting, Mentoring staff | → |
| 2 | CONTENT KNOWLEDGE | | | |
| 2.1 | Presentation of content | ← | Organisation, Structure, Sequence, Teacher as learner, Metacognition | → |
| 2.2 | Materials and resources | ← | Quantity, Quality, Currency, Guidance | → |
| 2.3 | Multiple perspectives | ← | Multiple sources, Novice to expert, Expert voice | → |
| 2.4 | Research | ← | Internal research, External research, Lecturer’s research, Student research | → |
| 3 | TECHNOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE | | | |
| 3.1 | Management | ← | Site management, Availability, Format, Placement of resources and activities, Personal profile, Student numbers, Student monitoring, Backup | → |
| 3.2 | Media | ← | Variety, Media purpose, Integration, Technical guidance, Development of digital literacy | → |
| 3.3 | Choice of tools | ← | Resources and activity tools, Schedule, Feedback mechanisms | → |
| 3.4 | Look and feel | ← | Aesthetic quality, Navigation, Teacher presence, Community | → |

Figure 1: MOOBRIC Online teaching and course development self reflection rubric

Based on these three areas of content, technology and pedagogy, descriptive statements have been developed to identify knowledge and skills associated with effective online teaching and course design. These descriptive

statements can be used to guide the online teacher's self-evaluation of their knowledge and skills, and to provide guidance about how to make the course more engaging for students. For example, the statements which inform the use of communication and interaction strategies, in the pedagogical knowledge component of the MOOBRIC, describe how online tools are used to share information, construct knowledge and discuss ideas (see Figure 2). The statements have been informed by the work of other online educators and educational theorists including Van Duzer's instructional design tips for online learning (2002), Biggs' theory of constructive alignment (2003); Salmon's advice about online learning and teaching (2004); and Herrington, Oliver and Herrington's constituent elements of online learning settings (2007).

| | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1.3 | Communication and interaction | Strategies: News Forum is used to distribute messages at times throughout the teaching period. | Strategies: News Forum is used at least weekly. Standard forums are used for sharing information, assessment and/or discussion. Some Web 2.0 tools (wikis, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) may be used. | Strategies: News Forum is used regularly. Varied types of forums and some Web 2.0 tools (wikis, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are used for sharing information, assessment and/or discussion. |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|

Figure 2: MOOBRIC descriptors of communication strategies

Within each Faculty and School at Avondale, staff will be encouraged to collaboratively analyse and utilise the MOOBRIC to gain a deeper understanding of how to develop effective online courses and how to facilitate learning within such courses. By identifying their own skills, it is envisaged that the MOOBRIC will empower academic teaching staff to drive their own professional learning processes by seeking out informal peer coaching and mentoring, and formal learning opportunities. As teaching staff begin to adopt the messages incorporated in the MOOBRIC, evaluation research and action research opportunities may also flourish in which teaching staff use the MOOBRIC to reflect upon, chart improvement paths and gather data to support their individual development plans and Faculty professional learning programs.

The future of the MOOBRIC

In the future the MOOBRIC will be provided online to give free access to other educators outside of Avondale. It is envisaged that the online version will allow for an interactive experience in which a participant can expand the areas that are of current interest to them and to leave the other areas collapsed, letting the plethora of detail remain hidden until required by the current user. A printable version will also be available to allow the user to take their current investigations away with them for later perusal and self-reflection.

Furthermore, the online version of the MOOBRIC will incorporate a function to gather feedback from its users to enhance future iterations of the tool. A questionnaire will be offered, giving opportunities for teachers and designers of online courses to comment on their use of the MOOBRIC, in particular how use of the MOOBRIC may have influenced their practice and, hence, engagement with the process of teaching, learning and course development in the online context.

It is envisaged that the MOOBRIC will be used as a self-reflective device (not a big-brother, top-down quality assurance imposition). It is intended that it will be a dynamic and iterative tool, whose attached examples can change and evolve in response to staff and users' feedback (especially in the online version). It is intended that, along with the more interactive online version, there will be a printable version in which all examples are expanded. The website may also offer an archive of past editions, in order to allow for comparison and the preferences of those who become attached to using a particular version. Additionally, a news section is envisaged, which will chronicle changes and the philosophies underpinning them. Therefore, the online MOOBRIC news section will serve dual purposes; firstly, to inform users of changes and reasoning; and secondly, it is expected that the MOOBRIC will be treated as a starting point which individuals and institutions may alter to suit their own needs.

A generic version of the MOOBRIC will be presented at the conference with opportunities for conference delegates to offer feedback about the tool's further development as well as to consider how the tool can be used in their own institution.

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