

Research Article

Fostering Democratic Education for Mature Age Students in Higher Education

Ameena Payne¹

1. Deakin University, Australia

Today's learners are entering the digital learning environment with a variety of pre-existing knowledge, aptitudes, opinions, values and capabilities which impact how they engage with and construe information.

This conceptual article offers suggestions to higher education institutions and educators on ways to improve the learning environment for the increasing mature age student cohort, including how mature age students can be better supported to succeed in their educational journey by fostering democratic education online spaces.

Fostering Democratic Education in Foundational Units for Mature-Aged Students in Higher Education

Ameena Payne

eLearning Advisor, Swinburne Online, Melbourne, Australia

apayne@swin.edu.au; info@ameenapayne.com

Introduction

Increasingly, higher education (HE) cohorts are comprised of mature age learners commencing their first year of HE online. The term 'mature-age' refers to adults who enter their course based on work experience or have not studied recently (Western Sydney University, 2020). According to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017b), the number of fully online students grew from 17.5% in 2010 to 21.9% in 2015 (Stone & O'Shea, 2019, p. 57). 'Available data indicate that mature-age students are generally more strongly represented in online than face-to-face studies' (Open Universities Australia, 2015 as cited in Stone & O'Shea, 2019, p. 57). Mature age students are 'more likely to be in the paid workforce and/or to have responsibility for others, such as partners and children' (Stone & O'Shea, 2019, p. 58). As such commencing mature-age students may initially struggle with goal setting, time management, academic writing and/or conducting academic research.

A key aim of HE curriculum is to support all students, and particularly commencing students, to adjust successfully to online study according to each learners' varied needs. Foundational units are developed to ensure students have the background knowledge to achieve success in their first year of undergraduate study (University of Tasmania, 2021). As a force that can surmount differences in privilege and background, education can only accomplish its goal as the great

social equaliser if we work to ensure that all are able to receive the supports they need to reach their learning goals and advance.

Learning goals

Curriculum objectives for commencing students should be to scaffold learners to critique ideas, to become self-regulated learners, to be ethically conscious, to learn how to identify credible sources, conduct research and become proficient in clear, succinct, accurate academic and reflective writing. Curriculum should allow students to meaningfully reflect on their capabilities and experiences.

Further, a goal is to encourage learners to be resourceful in the age of convenience – to focus on possibilities over constraints, to choose creativity and growth over comfort. However, the goal is resourcefulness beyond an individual level. Resourcefulness is achieved best when learners work together and combine their ideas – with (academic) integrity in mind. Thus, curriculum should aim for learners to be skillful communicators and active participants in their learning by accentuating the power of collaborative discussion and respectful debate with their peers.

Learning outcomes

I believe that tasks and activities should be aimed at engaging and measuring both the affective and cognitive domains. ‘Students must be involved in setting objectives for their own learning’ (Noddings, 2015, p. 28). Learning outcomes in commencing year curriculum should include effective time management and planning, academic writing and referencing and development and identification of students’ own short-term academic goals. ‘Students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal, assume some ownership of it, and can assess progress’ (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 202). Formative tasks may require students to produce their own academic argument by evaluating a range of electronic resources to support or contrast their own opinions and experiences; they may apply this knowledge to complete a range of summative assessments which include considering self-evaluating the strengths and development areas related to their personal academic performance.

Content/skill progression (the experiences)

The experience of a first-year curriculum strives for learners to feel empowered and respected. Learners are to think critically and independently; forming, changing or strengthening ones’ opinion is part of the learning process. As an online instructor, I endeavor to respect the rationality of my learners whilst encouraging them to apply the appropriate

performance criteria (Noddings, 2015, p. 100). Learning experience should encourage learners to have their own interpretations of the content and make connections. These experiences tend to not be as encouraged in traditional, didactic education (Payne, 2021, p. 3).

Pedagogical encounter

Comprehension, application and appreciation are the core of social constructivism as a pedagogy. Comprehension is the ability for learners to accurately understand and connect the learning material to what they already know. Appreciation implies that students recognise the purpose and the value of the content. 'Students tend to take [authentic assessment] more seriously if they can see the sense of what they are doing' (Brown & Race, 2012).

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment design and implementation should be fit-for-purpose. 'Authentic assessment can be described as the degree of realism in varied workplaces and life situations which students may find themselves' (Payne, 2021, p. 3). Many students in foundational units are current professionals that may be pursuing a different career trajectory or already be working in a wide range of fields such as, but not limited to, business, psychology, or education. Thus, the assessment of authentic learning is comprised of disciplined analysis, consolidation of knowledge, and value beyond 'performativity in education' (Biesta, 2010, p. 6). I believe programs should prioritise deep learning by applying diagnostic, formative and summative assessment. Quality assessment should serve not only as a metric for outcomes but should also facilitate and enrich the learning process itself.

In determining the most effective assessment, Shute (2008, p. 154) asks academics to consider the conditions that lend to learners' ability to refine their skillset and improve their understanding. Diagnostic and formative assessment 'can signal a gap between a current level of performance and some desired level of performance or goal' (Shute, 2008, p. 154). Diagnostic self-assessment is an approach to intentional engagement with learning materials and action in within a task (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006, p. 201). This involving approach enables students to take ownership over their learning process (Gosper & Ifenthaler, 2014). Ideally this will 'facilitate a more strategic use of [learning materials and] feedback by the learner' (Crisp, 2010, p. 40). '[Diagnostic assessment] can better prepare educators for meeting the (academic) diversity of learners' (Payne, 2021, p. 13).

It is the purpose of diagnostic assessment to provide educators with information about learners' familiarity with and understanding of the unit's topics and concepts; once known, a more tailored approach to teaching and learning, such as

coaching and/or scaffolding can be implemented. Since new knowledge and skills are dependent on pre-existing knowledge and skills, reflection of what students know and the skills they hold when they begin a new topic of study can help facilitators ensure engagement with learning that builds from students' strengths, acknowledge and address their weaknesses.

I believe diagnostic assessment should be presented as a 'pathway for encouraging self-regulation of students' approaches to their current and future learning' (Crisp, 2010, p. 39). 'Low stakes diagnostic tasks would establish a baseline and allow students to determine their preparedness for their current learning activities' (Crisp, 2010, p. 39). As a self-aligned constructivist, assessment should be used as a tool to both enhance learning and educators' understanding of what students know and what they need to develop further. Assessment should not be used as an accountability tool that uplifts some and triggers others to give up.

Assessment should strive to enhance the quality of student learning, not to provide artefacts for evaluation 'operated by funding mechanisms, certification, audit and surveillance mechanisms' (Connell, 2009, p. 108). 'We need to decide whether we are assessing product or process (or both), theory or practice (or both), subject knowledge as a discrete area or its application to professional other contexts' (Brown & Race 2012). 'If we wish to say something about the direction of education, we always need to complement information with views about what is considered to be desirable' (Biesta, 2016, pp. 12-13). As the skills that employers seek change and as society's values shift toward postmodernism, it is also important for assessment to be fluid.

Towards an 'intelligent theory of education'

The educational value of a first-year program is due to its ability to develop thought as a rational, well-organised and well-formulated line of reasoning (Noddings, 2015, p. 85). The value is also evident in its ability to: be applied to real life contexts and further study, assist learners to explore their opinions of current issues and clarify their ideas not only to themselves but to their peers and instructors and must encourage learners to extend, develop and make sense of their ideas. First year programs should also encourages learners to reflect upon the significance of what they have learnt and acknowledge how they have changed their thinking. 'People capable of critical thinking in the strong sense can challenge their own assumptions and arguments' (Noddings, 2015, p. 88).

'Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic [education] promotes a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed [...]' (Dewey, 1997).

Towards a liberal & democratic digital education

My beliefs about learning align to what would be classed as 'liberal education' (Pring, 2001), the social constructivist theory and relate to the idea of growth. 'The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically' (King, 1947). Plato's vision of education was aimed at producing a balanced and just society; Rousseau's vision was about the worth of the individual, the need for freedom (Walker & Soltis, 2009). Like Dewey (Walker & Soltis, 2009), I believe that curriculum can and should serve both aims.

According to Dewey 'an experience is educative only if it produces growth – if, that is, students leave the experience more capable or interested in engaging in the new experience' (Noddings, 2015, p. 26). I believe that effective learning occurs when meaning is created from experience (Merriam, 2018). I aim for my learners to engage in deep learning by taking responsibility for their learning process. My objective is to promote self-reflection, encourage them to gather a wide range of information, become self-directed and collaborate with each other (Merriam, 2018). Through digital collaboration and discussion, learners may be led to think more deeply (Noddings, 2015, p. 27).

A truly innovative society values diversity of perspectives which is underpinned by effective collaboration; collaboration is fueled by empathy. Empathy requires an intentional look at the world from a perspective beyond ones' own. Collaborative brainstorming complemented by critical thinking builds and fosters a culture of mutual respect.

Dewey's goals for citizenship education are still pertinent today, especially given the current socio-political climate; indoctrination and miseducation are important issues in a democratic, moral education. An educator who deliberately attempts to hinder growth of a learner towards autonomy, indoctrinates (Hare, 1964, p. 78; McLaughlin, 1984, p. 78). The move toward human rights, freedom of expression and autonomy, in the 1950s and 1960s, brought with it an upturn in pedagogy that emphasised discussion, openness, and independent and thought. 'Deliberate citizenship education is made visible when students are educated to be open-minded, to express themselves freely, to consider a plurality of opinions and to respect the limits of reasonable difference; deliberation is not devoid of ethical confrontation' (Davids & Waghid, 2016, pp. 35-36).

An approach to facilitate critical thinking in a morally educative way would be to employ 'pedagogical neutrality' (Noddings, 2015, p. 100). Educators shouldn't repress their own views; however, in divulging, we should ensure to express the views as our own and to present opposing views fairly (Noddings, 2015, p. 100). Thus, democratic and liberal education emphasises methodological motifs of freedom, volition, reflection, self-control, and independence.

Dewey (1997) advocated for empowering learners by honouring their experiences and learning styles. In a democratic education, educators get to know their learners' situations and experiences. One must 'have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those

who are learning' (Dewey, 1997). In essence, Dewey is arguing for educators to meet learners where they are, wherever that may be (Payne, 2021, p. 13).

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Biographical note:

ORCID: 0000-0001-9938-4144

Twitter: @ameenalpayne

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/ameenalpayne/s

Ameena is an educator within the disciplines of education and business in both vocational and higher education. She holds a Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (Higher Education), Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, Diploma of Project Management and a Certificate IV in Training & Assessment. She is currently pursuing her Master of Education (Research Intensive) at Deakin University where she is a Deakin International Scholarship recipient. Her interests lay in learner analytics, assessment design and technology-enhanced feedback – not to mention equitable education and education reform.

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