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Clients as an Instructional Resource

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Higher education is under pressure to change from both within and outside (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). One such pressure is from future employers. According to the survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Supiano, 2013), most employers significantly value students' authentic experience over their classroom activities or grades. Authentic learning experience is a direction for teaching and learning innovations. As I discussed in my previous blog post ("Let's Get Real about Learning"), authentic learning facilitates the transfer of learning and provides students contextual knowledge and skills. Students who learned decontextualized knowledge can answer items on a test but may not be able to use what they learn to solve real-world problems. Integrating the "authentic factor" is especially important today because the social division of labor is becoming more and more pronounced and complex. Future professionals need context-specific competencies about where, when, why and how to employ the concepts, rules, and principles they learn in class.

If above-mentioned assumptions are valid, then higher education needs to change from content-oriented education to contextual skill-oriented education. Learning *about* business and learning *to be* a businessperson are related but significantly different. "Learning to be" requires concrete connections between apprentices and mentors and between course context and professional context. Knowledge needs to be situated within the right context in order to promote learning transfer (Siemens, 2004). Our students need real-world components (and most specifically meaningful real world tasks) as learning resources, and they need real-world connections to help them increase their job marketability after they graduate.

One key solution to reach the goal of "learning to be" is to consider integrating real-world clients when planning, designing, and implementing instruction. *Clients* here refers to the source of learning task requests. Clients could be business, corporate, or community-based organizations. The client will typically specify the issues, goals, and parameters for the solution/artifact and use industrial standards to judge the value of students' work. For a pedagogical purpose, using the term "client" does not mean there is a required payment for the service; it instead signifies the importance of learners' work and context (Waldner & Hunter, 2008).

In a client-based course, students will work on tasks that address clients' needs. In terms of instructional design, a client's needs become a focus point to streamline course materials and to integrate theories and practice (Waldner & Hunter,

2008). The type of learning tasks vary, depending the nature of subject areas and professional contexts, from developing an orientation course for an organization to creating a promotion video for a new product. For example, Garris, Madden and Rodgers (2008) illustrated public administration students' conduct analyses for a government and nonprofit organization, and produced a useful report to the organization. Cocchiarella and Booth (2015) provided another example in which students created media- and arts-based products for clients like festival organizers.

Compared to conventional courses in which instructors and students initiate themselves, a client-based course emphasizes an approach to meet the "expressed needs" from a client who has a specific goal and wants a specific type of artifact. Meeting clients' needs gives students valuable experience in creating impact work, collaborating with clients, and sensing professional culture. Students are involved directly and deeply in the real world and have a tangible impact in a professional context. They have a great opportunity to apply knowledge and to understand the validity of knowledge in the real world. They exercise higher-order thinking, gain the deepest sense of complex reality, and are exposed to industry conventions to the maximum.

Using clients as a learning resource provides powerful authentic experiences, but usually takes months—even years—to accomplish. Client-based courses also give instructors and students the most challenge because the tasks are often complex and ill-defined, and many of elements are ambiguous (Skilton, Forsyth, & White 2008). Designing and implementing client-based courses is also constrained by resources, time, and money. In my next blog post, I will discuss some of those challenges and strategies to cope with them.

About the Author

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