

***Introduction to
University Teaching Series***

Teaching at a Distance

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Other titles in the series include:

Teaching Small Groups

Postgraduate Supervision

Balancing Academic Demands on Your Time

Assessing Student Learning

Lecturing to Large Groups

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Foreword

Teaching has always been an important responsibility of university academics. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that the ability to teach a diverse set of students in a range of teaching and learning contexts does not necessarily come automatically once an academic is appointed to a university position. Within the University of New England, there are several forms of resources and support available for newly appointed academics so that they can assume their responsibilities more easily.

This series of booklets Introduction to University Teaching prepared by Dr Izabel Soliman for the Teaching and Learning Centre covers a range of topics of vital interest to those staff who are appointed with limited teaching experience. They also fulfil an important role of providing an overview or refresher for those academics who have been teaching for some time.

With academic life becoming busier and busier, these booklets provide the means to learn about university teaching without the need to attend workshops or seminars. They also offer additional background material and resources to those who do attend the Teaching and Learning Centre workshop program. They provide a flexible approach to learning about university teaching.

I commend these booklets to you. Even those of us with wide teaching experience always find there is something new to learn when it comes to teaching.

Professor Sue Johnston
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
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Introduction

In developing units for distance education we can design three types of interactions to facilitate learning (Moore 1993)

- Learner–content interaction
- Learner–teacher interaction
- Learner–learner interaction

The focus of this booklet will be on the first type, learner-content interaction, in relation to the design of print-based materials. When teaching at a distance, "It is in the act of engaging with the material that learning begins" (Toohey, 1999, p.17). However, the importance of learner-teacher and learner-learner interactions is acknowledged. Such interactions are facilitated by weekend and residential schools and by electronic means. (For information on the latter refer to other publications provided by the Teaching and Learning Centre, e. g. *Introducing Online Teaching*, (Gratton, 1998).

In developing materials for teaching at a distance you will need to anticipate the needs of the distance education learner. In this booklet you will first encounter a profile of a typical student, based upon recent institutional research (Meek, 1999; Kleeman 1999) and from long, cumulative practical experience of teaching externally.

Meeting the Needs of the Distance Education Learner

Scenario

Doris Sortini is a mature 31 year old woman who works as a teller in banking in a Sydney suburb. She has decided to enrol at UNE in a distance education course in Accounting and Financial Management which she thinks will improve her chances for advancement in the bank. This is her first experience in tertiary and distance education and she doesn't know anyone who has or is studying in this mode. She has not studied since completing her Higher School Certificate and she is not sure that she has what it takes to do this course. She has decided to enrol at UNE because of the course it offers and the flexibility of combining full-time work with study.

It has, however, required a family effort to make her studies a possibility. Doris travels an hour's journey by train to and fro from work daily and she uses this time for reading unit materials. She also devotes three evenings between 8 and 12pm to study, but some nights she is too tired to tackle the work. Sunday afternoons are better when her partner looks after their two children and sometimes takes them out of the house to give her some undisturbed study time. Her study space is in the dining room and she keeps her materials on a shelf in the linen cupboard. There is no public library in the suburb where she lives and she has few opportunities to travel the long distance to a university library.

Her work day starts at 6am to get herself and the household ready for the day. Her partner drops off their 3 year old daughter at pre school and also picks her up in the evening. Their 8 year old son walks to school and Doris has arranged that he goes to her sister's house down the street after school until 5.30pm when her spouse arrives home with their daughter.

What does this scenario indicate about Doris' motivation for study?

Strong motivation to advance in her position is a positive attribute for persevering in her studies. By removing or reducing obstacles to learning her teachers can help maintain her motivation. If, however, advancement is her only motivation it could also lead to early discouragement if she encounters problems or performs poorly initially. The more reasons a person has for studying the greater their influence on their studies and the more likely they are to perform better on assessment tasks than those with only one reason (Strang in Thorpe, 1987, p.74). Early experience of success in her studies will also strengthen motivation.

Given her background what problems might Doris encounter in relation to studying?

She will probably experience a period of uncertainty early in her studies during which she will reassess whether the course or unit being studied was an appropriate choice. Counselling from academic staff to help clarify her ideas could be appropriate via telephone or email. Contact with other students could also be vital at this stage, to share and receive affirmation from others with similar aspirations towards study and personal achievement. (Refer to the TLC booklets on *Using Email and Listserves in Teaching* (Salmon, 1998), and *Using Voicemail for Teaching and Learning* (Wylie, 1998.)

Her confidence in her own abilities may be also weak initially from lack of previous study but at least her resolve to begin studying indicates a wish not to accept a low opinion of her own abilities. The kind of feedback she receives on her first assessment tasks could be crucial for her self concept and perseverance.

Having no previous experience of tertiary study she has to be launched into the system of discourse within her chosen field. Clear explanations of abstract terms and even a glossary could be helpful. Her approach to learning may be one of reproducing ideas and facts, or a surface approach, rather than engaging with the materials in a critical, reflective way as is the expectation in many university units. The design of the unit should alert her to the kind of learning approach expected, help her to deal with the learning materials more effectively, and encourage her to reflect on how well she is learning and on the skills associated with learning.

Opportunity to bring her own relevant experience to bear on assignments and on reading could also be important factors in motivating her to persevere with her studies. Learning which is contextualised or problem centered, rather than subject/discipline centered, may be more relevant to her experience.

Given her lifestyle, what might be her expectations about the nature of the study materials for the unit in which she is enrolled?

Doris has a limited amount of time available for studying. She also has to carefully balance her study time with work and family commitments. Her home environment is not conducive to learning. She will most likely expect to receive all the materials essential for her study and materials that are clearly structured and indicate the amount of time she should devote to study and assignment preparation. To meet her needs, workloads should be stated clearly and not changed without explanation or negotiation. Given young children and family responsibilities, the cost of tertiary study could be a problem in attending residential schools and in buying new books and other study materials. Access to second hand books and an optional residential school could be important factors in retaining her as a student.

General principles for teaching in the distance education mode

Distance learners learn best (Baath, 1986) when they

- can make sense of the information presented
- discover meaning themselves
- feel 'safe' and know what is expected of them
- feel that someone cares, e.g. tries to anticipate their problems
- have opportunities to practice expected skills
- feel they are progressing successfully, and
- find that their learning meets their needs and relates to their experience and knowledge.

Developing Distance Education Materials

A print-based package is usually the core of distance education materials at UNE, providing students with guidance about how to proceed in their study of a subject.

Advantages of print materials

- Print is convenient for students because it is portable and requires no equipment other than the book itself.
- It is the medium of formal academic communication and 'a comfortable' familiar medium to work in for most lecturers who have a basic understanding of planning and writing printed texts.
- Print is also a familiar and flexible medium for study for most students.
- International students are usually comfortable with written English.
- Both graphics and text can be presented in print.
- The reader controls the pace of reading, whereas audiotapes, video, broadcasts and lectures offer students less control.
- Dense, complex arguments or information can be presented in print because the reader controls the pace and can easily find and re-read a difficult text.
- Students need no special equipment or power supply (except at night).
- It is easy for readers to scan and find information in print.
- Making notes is easy, readers can write them in the margin.
- The cost of study for students is low if print material is supplied.
- Development cost is usually lower than information presented for mass distribution in other media. Mass duplication costs are relatively low.

Disadvantages of print materials

While it is the prime medium for distance education, print has a number of disadvantages when compared with other media.

- Most other media have more power to persuade, motivate and entertain.
- Print is primarily a one-way information channel, it needs the support of two-way communications technologies or face-to-face work to support the dialogue necessary for effective interaction with students.

- Print is a less personal and less immediate medium, and may increase the student's perception of distance from the lecturer and institutional support.
- Some content in some subjects relies on sounds and speech that can not be shown in print.
- Some lecturer's written communication skills are less effective than their face-to-face presentation skills.
- Some lecturers find it difficult to write at a level that students understand.
- Print does not present motion or sound.
- Printed materials are permanent and public; errors, faults and out of date information can not be changed.

The unit materials sent to students usually contain three main components: a Unit Handbook, a Unit Study Guide and a Resource Book

Unit Handbook

The Unit Handbook includes an overview of the whole subject. It is the first document that students usually consult to find out about the subject and what they must do to succeed. In this respect, it is like the first lecture that you might give to a class of internal students to clarify details of subject administration.

More specifically, it usually includes the following information:

*Organisation*_____

- welcoming and motivating message from the unit coordinator responsible for student support in the subject
- general information on the school or department, subject number, subject name, credit value, duration, prerequisites
- explanation of the relationship of the unit to other subjects in a course
- suggested weekly study schedule
- description of the backgrounds of teaching staff, their interests and how they can be contacted
- directory of assistance telephone, fax, email

*Structure*_____

- unit aims or goals which indicate the direction in which you expect the students to head in the study of the subject
- Learning objectives which specify what you expect the students to understand, appreciate, do, see in a new way etc., as a result of studying the unit, and what will count as evidence of understanding, etc.
- content outline which may be a list of topics or concepts in a subject area, or a 'concept map' (see example in Appendix) showing the relationships among concepts and functioning as an 'advance organiser' for the subject matter, indicating the conceptual journey the students will take.

*Assessment*_____

- description of the teaching/learning approach which is linked to the learning objectives in the unit and the assignments set for assessment

- assessment tasks including due dates, length and weighting of assignments, guidelines for assignment layout, preparation and mailing
- assessment criteria to be used for assessing qualities and standards attained in each assignment
- examples of model assignments
- policies about late submission and resubmission of assignments
- information on weekend and residential schools if offered
- information on examinations if required.

Study Guide

The unit study guide includes all advisory materials for the study of the unit, e.g. learning activities, study hints, feedback, answers to questions and commentaries on the learning activities and reading materials. It is the key teaching component of a distance learning package. Its main function is to guide and support learners as they work through the unit materials. It will contain elements that explain to students how they should study the subject, what they should be doing week by week and where and how to use other media and communications tools like videos, audiotapes, teleconferences, email or broadcasts.

The Study Guide normally consists of:

- *Contents page*
- *Subject introduction*

This provides advice to learners on how to approach the subject and how to use the Study Guide. This advice is most important when students may be studying independently for the first time.

- *Chapters/sections/modules*

A maximum of six to eight chapters/modules is recommended, but some subjects by their nature, require more modules, e.g. one per week or two weeks of the semester.

The aim of such a structure is to break up the study materials into smaller learning tasks and allow learners to assess their understanding of material presented in each section before going on to the next section.

Typically, each chapter should include an introduction which should seek to:

- motivate learners and orient them in the subject
- explain how the unit relates to the assessment tasks
- highlight the importance and relevance of topics presented
- provide a rationale for the chapter
- link new concepts to learners' past experiences
- introduce main concepts (advance organisers)
- explain the overall structure of the chapter
- advise learners of special resources that will be needed
- advise learners of special activities associated with the chapter (for example, tutorials or telephone tutorials)

- estimate study time for each chapter. Allow a study rate of between five pages per hour (for difficult to learn material) and ten pages per hour (for easy to learn material).
- *Activities*

Each section could also include an **activity**, such as a question or exercise related to the information presented and assessment and **feedback** for the activity.

Activities should be intellectually challenging, but should not require long responses. Tell students the purpose of the activity and if the time required may be more than a few minutes, give a suggested duration. The activity should be clearly relevant to the subject objectives and assessment and related to the student's experience.

The questions may be in relation to key concepts and principles to focus the reading of resource materials and thus aid recall and assimilation of information. Take care that they don't just encourage surface learning by being trivial or of a mechanical kind rather than prompting deeper, reflective engagement with the unit materials.

- *Self-assessment*

Self-assessment questions may help students monitor their progress when they are asked to:

- recall important content
- classify concepts
- compare concepts
- evaluate information
- calculate an answer
- solve a problem
- prepare for an assignment
- do a practical exercise
- interview a person or collect some data
- state their personal position on an issue for future reflection
- recall and reflect on personal experience
- suggest examples
- prepare for future learning
- develop procedures, and
- summarise.

- *References to readings*

When the Study Guide refers students to readings some preparation and/or de-briefing should be given. The tone of the instructions should be similar to those you might give to a tutorial class when asking them to read, listen to or watch some information. Pre-reading questions and comments can be used to focus the learners' attention on specific aspects of the reading. Also

- suggest time allocations for readings and activities, and
- identify the most important articles to be read with great attention to detail and those which may be read with attention to selected parts only.

If the students are given too much reading, they tend to read selectively. To encourage them to focus on important topics, limit the volume of compulsory readings. Optional readings and some commentary on them can be used to encourage further reading.

Introduce the main issues that will be covered in a set of readings.

Provide introductory comments on a reading or a group of readings and suggest questions students should address in their reading.

- ***Feedback on activities***

Give students feedback on each activity. If no feedback is given, students will have no indication of the quality of their response. They will not do the activities

Appropriate feedback does not always require a correct answer, as long as you give students information with which to compare their responses. Feedback could consist of:

- typical answers
- criteria to allow learners to assess their response
- comments on the activity and possible responses
- for calculations, feedback is often provided in a separate section at the end of the Study Guide. In most cases, feedback commentary should be provided in the text, after the activity.

- ***Chapter conclusion***

The conclusion of each chapter should emphasise the main points made to ensure that students can clearly identify what is important. Other ideas for the unit conclusion are:

- a checklist of key concepts to assist revision
- references for further study
- review questions to allow students to test their understanding and to prepare students for assessment
- encouragement for writing summaries and for reflecting upon learning at the end of a learning episode.

Navigational Aids

To help students find information and move backwards and forwards in the text without getting lost, you can include cues and other typographical devices in the learning materials.

- ***Headings***

Headings indicate the structure of the learning materials. The title of each heading should be carefully chosen to clearly indicate the content. Some headings are more important than others and they are shown by larger type and more space around the heading.

The use of too many levels of headings makes it difficult for learners to follow the structure of the content reflected in the heading levels. The number of heading levels should be four or less.

- ***Marginal notes***

Notes range from single words to whole paragraphs. They are shown in the left hand or instructional column and may be used to:

- present short definitions
- highlight key concepts where they are explained in the text
- comment on the text
- refer learners to other related materials.

- ***Other aids***

Visual diagrams or flow charts, or written instructions assist students in finding their way into and around the subject matter and to indicate a sequence for studying the learning materials.

Illustrations inform, describe, alleviate monotony of uninterrupted prose, and space and pace information in the guide

A glossary provides definitions of key terms and concepts for easy reference.

Resource Book

This includes all the required reading materials, copies of lectures, book chapters or journal articles and titles of other optional materials. It may also include information on other materials in the study package that learners may be required to access, such as videos and audiotapes, government publications, or resources available in workplaces, and lists of references to wider reading relevant to assignment topics.

Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning

The design of the materials can facilitate students' interaction with learning materials so that their engagement will lead to understanding and integration with their previous knowledge. Research studies in higher education indicate that such learning outcomes require the design of unit materials which encourage a 'deep' approach to learning (Biggs, 1991; Ramsden, 1992).

A 'deep' approach is characterised by the intrinsic motives of interest, curiosity and desire to understand the material for oneself. It is reflected in students interacting reflectively and critically with the materials, relating ideas to previous experience, using organising principles to integrate ideas, relating evidence to conclusions and examining the logic of arguments.

This approach may be contrasted with a 'surface' approach which is characterised by the intention to reproduce the content, passively accepting ideas and information, concentrating only on meeting the requirements of assessment tasks, not reflecting on purpose or strategies in learning, routinely memorising facts and procedures, and failing to recognise patterns or guiding principle.

Students tend to favour one approach over the other, depending on which one is emphasised in the current task and which has yielded success in their studies in the past.

- *To what extent is the distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning recognisable in your experience?*
- *What would a student in your units have to do to demonstrate out a deep approach?*

Since the surface approach alone does not lead to understanding, in designing units for study, you should seek to avoid the features associated with a surface learning (Gibbs, 1992), namely:

- a heavy workload
- excessive amount of unit materials to cover
- lack of opportunity to pursue subjects in depth
- lack of choice over method of study, and
- an anxiety provoking assessment system.

Teaching strategies for a deep approach

Teaching strategies which foster a deep approach to learning are those which

- include clearly stated academic expectations clarifying
 - ⇒ main concepts to be understood
 - ⇒ relations to be drawn
 - ⇒ arguments to be developed
 - ⇒ skills and processes to be demonstrated
- provide appropriate motivation by explaining
 - ⇒ why the unit/topic is important and interesting
 - ⇒ the relevance of the issues included and
 - ⇒ their relation to real-life problems
- require a high degree of learning activity in studying the subject matter by
 - ⇒ encouraging students to examine their motives for learning

- ⇒ including goal setting activities
- ⇒ linking tasks with goals
- ⇒ providing in-text questions and activities which require identifying prior knowledge and areas of ignorance
- ⇒ predicting possible misconceptions regarding the subject matter and addressing them
- ⇒ providing opportunity to apply acquired knowledge to problems
- ⇒ testing understanding by review activities
- help students develop a well-structured knowledge base by
 - ⇒ relating new knowledge to previous knowledge
 - ⇒ providing exercises and tasks to integrate new knowledge with everyday experience and personal beliefs
 - ⇒ requiring analysis and critical reflection
- encourage reflection on the meaning of what has been learned through
 - ⇒ self-assessment questions, and
 - ⇒ critical reflective tasks and essay topics.

Initiation into Discourse

Because by its nature studying involves dismantling old meanings and constructing new, it arouses powerful and ambivalent feelings—hostility as the familiar is undermined and satisfaction as the new is constructed

(Northedge, 1987, p. 149).

Studying a new subject may be regarded as a process of 'initiation' into an 'expert discourse' (Northedge, 1987). This view implies that students, as novices, in the discourse, will need strategies to help them make sense of the concepts, ideas, and explanations in the discourse, and of why particular issues are the focus of debate and why certain factors are related.

Northedge's work with students in the Open University suggests that the inclusion in the unit materials of various directions and orientation strategies for dealing with the materials facilitates the study of the discourse. Examples of such strategies which you may recommend to students are the following:

- skimming the resource materials, the contents pages, the introductions, headings and conclusions to obtain an overview of the structure and content of a set text
- examining pictures, figures and tables for the kind of issues the text deals with
- underlining words, taking notes, attempting to summarise sections all of which provide "a makeshift mental platform of provisional meanings from which one can launch oneself further into the discourse" (Northedge, 1987, p. 149)
- use of a 3R approach: read, recall and review
- encouragement of self-reflection to monitor oneself for what has and has not been understood
- learning the discourse by learning to write in it and thus recreating what one knows or has come to understand

- breaking up the process of writing into stages and experimenting with and reflecting on ways of tackling each stage
- putting structure into studying, "creating order within the general chaos" (p.152) by planning when to read, how long to work at a stretch, which books to start on, to what depth to read, and how long to persevere with the same task.

Holmberg (1995, p.47), in his work on distance education, introduced the concept of 'guided didactic conversation' to describe how the distance educator should communicate with students to ensure meaningful learning. His theory suggests the following:

- by adopting a conversational style in the teaching materials, the distance educator can promote a sense of a personal relation with the learner which in turn promotes pleasure in study and motivation
- intellectual pleasure and motivation are favourable for the attainment of learning objectives and the use of appropriate study processes and methods
- messages given and received in conversational forms are comparatively easily understood and remembered
- planning and guiding the work are necessary for organised study which is characterised by explicit or implicit goals.

Further development of these ideas in relation to print materials suggests that a good way to approach writing is to think of yourself as a tutor sitting beside the student, presenting information in a friendly, conversational tone and advising him or her about how to study. Your writing should therefore include conversational features such as:

- use of personal and possessive pronouns: I, my you, yours etc.
- short sentences; keep most less than 30 words long
- positive rather than negative statements
- active rather than passive language ("Do this", not "This should be done")
- personal not impersonal constructions ("You should", not "The student should")
- avoidance of clichés
- explanation of the meaning of technical words.
- explicit advice and suggestions as to what to do and what to avoid, what to pay particular attention to, and
- involving the students emotionally so that they take a personal interest in the subject and its problems.

Promoting Analysis

To promote the analysis of resource materials direct students to perform various tasks such as:

- identifying main ideas or key concepts and their relationships in a text
- developing a map of the concepts showing their links and relationships thus externalising their understanding of the subject in a form that can be read and interpreted by you and their peers (see Appendix and refer to Fraser, 1998)
- identifying the author's central argument or position and the evidence used to support this position
- identifying the descriptive and value-laden terms
- articulating their own position in relation to the values expressed, and
- identifying strengths and weaknesses of a text in terms of how adequately the author accounts for the factors relevant to an issue and deals with them in sufficient depth.

Promoting Reflection

The concept of reflective learning has been widely discussed in the literature on the education of professionals such as teachers and health workers. Various definitions and models have been proposed (e.g. Boud *et al.*, 1985, Kemmis, 1985, Schön, 1987, Mezirov *et al.*, 1990). Reflection may be defined as "*a process self awareness whereby people recapture their experience, think about it, attend to their feelings, mull it over and evaluate it*" (Boud *et al.*, 1985, p.26). This 'experience' may be the subject matter of learning.

Reflection *in* action involves thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it, while reflection *on* action involves recapturing experience by looking inward at your thoughts and outward at the situations in which you find yourself.

Reflection may have an instrumental focus, which is concerned with the means rather than the goals of an activity or process. Alternatively, reflection may have an interpretive focus, on exposing and clarifying personal meaning. Reflection may also have a critical focus when one questions the taken for granted (Jarvis, 1992) and challenges conventional practices (see more on the critical below).

Reflection also involves metacognition or thinking about thinking, making inferences, discriminating, drawing relationships, validating ideas and feelings, making new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience. Writing, brainstorming, and dialogue are common strategies for promoting reflective thinking. In relation to prompting reflective engagement with unit materials reflective questions may be included in the study guide or resource materials as well as models or examples of reflective processes.

The outcomes of reflection may also include a new way of doing something, the development of a new perspective or of a new skill, the clarification of an issue, or the resolution of a problem.

John Dewey (1933), the American educator, identifies three attitudes as prerequisites for reflection: *open-mindedness*, or an "active desire to listen to more sides than one, to give heed to the facts from whatever source they come; to give full attention to alternative possibilities; and to recognize the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us" (p.29). The second attitude is *responsibility* to synthesise ideas and to apply them for an ethical purpose; while the third one is *whole-heartedness*, or the strength to put ideas into practice. Students need to be exposed to ideas and to assignments that will help them develop these attitudes.

Hunting for Assumptions

A process in reflection advocated by Brookfield (1995) is that of "*hunting for assumptions or taken for granted beliefs*". He maintains that "*Becoming aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act is one of the most challenging intellectual puzzles we face in our lives*" (p.2).

Brookfield identifies three broad categories of assumptions:

- the paradigmatic or those implicit in particular world views
- prescriptive assumptions or what we think should be happening in a particular situation, and
- causal assumptions or those that help us understand how things work and how they can be changed.

Encouragement of the reflective process involves prompting discovery and investigation of assumptions. Without examining assumptions, Brookfield (1995) argues that we run the risk of believing that others are reading into our actions the meanings that we intend. We may also mistakenly think that our own commonsense interpretation of a situation is accurate and valid.

The study of cases relevant to situations in various disciplines is a possible strategy for reflective hunting for assumptions. Consider the following case from Brookfield (1995, p. 4) of how commonsense assumptions may inform an action in a teaching situation.

It's commonsense to visit small groups after you've set them a task, since this demonstrates your commitment to helping them learn. Visiting groups is an example of respectful, attentive, student-centred learning.

As an activity to encourage students to hunt for assumptions in your subject area, you could direct them to write an alternative interpretation of the action in the particular case provided with the aid of questions such as the following in relation to the case above:

- In what other ways might the teacher's visiting be interpreted?
- What may be students' interpretations of the teacher's group visiting?
- What may be the students' reactions to visiting that could lead to a false impression by the teacher?

You could then provide an example of a plausible alternative interpretation such as the one provided by Brookfield (1995, p.4) for the case above:

Visiting small groups after you've set them a task can seem like a form of assessment—a way of checking up to see whether they're doing what you told them to do. This can be insulting to students, since it implies that you don't trust them enough to do what you've asked. Students might change their behaviour during your visit to their group as a way of impressing you with the kind of behaviours they think you want to see. Their overwhelming concern is showing you what good, efficient, task-oriented learners they are rather than thoughtfully analysing and critiquing the task at hand.

Promoting Critical Reflection

Reflection is not by definition critical. Critical reflection involves moving beyond neutrality, exploring meanings beneath the surface and not simply taking things at face value. It means weighing and balancing alternatives, thinking about an issue from different perspectives than those provided, as if viewing them through a multi-faceted crystal.

Brookfield suggests that reflection becomes critical when it serves the following purposes:

- to illuminate how power under-girds or permeates, frames or distorts a process, situation or interaction which we thought was neutral or benevolent; and
- to question assumptions and practices that seem at first to be working for our own good or to make our lives easier but actually work against our own long-term interests.

The latter purpose involves a search for whose interests are being served by the status quo, the commonsense view, or the taken for granted.

Critical reflection can help students to develop a rationale for what they think and do that they can explain to others. This will give them a sense of being clear about what they stand for (Brookfield, 1995, p.22-26). Critical reflection can also help them develop a more realistic appraisal of their own roles in a social cultural context, and thus develop a more accurate understanding of the limits of their actions.

Critical reflection as a learning strategy can also be prompted in teaching at a distance by questions and assignments which encourage students to seek to understand how

- what is presented as 'natural' may be historically and socially constructed
- what is presented as 'neutral' may be partial and interest serving
- what is presented as 'personal' may be political, and
- what is presented as 'value free' may be gendered, classed and racial.

Model for critical reflection on a text

An example of a case from education followed by questions which require critical reflection by probing what may be taken for granted is provided by Brookfield (1995, p. 9) as follows:

No practice is more beloved of progressive educators than that of having students sit in a circle rather than in rows. The circle is seen as a physical manifestation of democracy, a group of peers facing each other as respectful equals. Teachers like the circle because it draws students into conversation and gives everyone a chance to be seen and heard. Doing this respects and arms the value of students' experiences. It places their voices front and centre.

- *Could sitting in a circle be an ambiguous experience for some students?*
- *Which students might find it comfortable and which ones might find it painful, even humiliating?*
- *Does the circle have an oppressive potential ?*
- *What troubling uncertain reality may lurk beneath the circle's democratic veneer?*

Assignments in Distance Education

In distance education, assignments are often the main (and sometimes the only) vehicle for interaction between you and your students. They can provide you with information about the students' misconceptions about the subject matter and about their specific learning problems. The comments you provide on their assignments give students feedback about their progress in the subject and they give you information about how your educational materials may be improved to better deal with learners' needs.

There are many kinds of assignments suitable for inclusion in units taught externally. Your choice should depend on the content of your learning objectives.

- **Essay topics** can range from given to open-ended or negotiated topics. (Remember that your choice can affect the availability of library resources.)
- **Resource-based assignments** are those where students are provided with resources in order to complete one assigned task. Students may be required to manipulate, identify, label, interpret, synthesise or experiment with the resources. Resources can take many forms including videotapes, audiotapes, readings, photographs, computer hardware/software and laboratory kits.

- **Problem sets** may be a series of short written or numerical problems or questions. Maths and computer programming subjects often make use of problem sets.
- **Observational studies** enable students to apply techniques of data collection and interpretation of data as well as problem solving and other research skills.
- **Presentations** which students select or are given a topic to present to their peers. These can be presented in a written format and circulated for comment or presented by students at audio conferences or workshops.
- **Workbooks or journals** can be required to show work done throughout the semester or to show the development of a student's ideas, and their application to daily life.
- **Other types of assignments** include case studies, literature reviews, report writing, multiple choice questions, short answer questions, portfolios and computer based assignments.

Integrating Assessment

Assessment is the thread that links all the elements in the study package together. Plan to integrate the assessment tasks with

- explicit and meaningful learning objectives, and
- the Study Guide advice and activities.

If these links are explicit, students will appreciate the requirements of the subject and focus their learning, efficiently and effectively. (Refer also to TLC booklet on *Assessing Student Learning*, Soliman, 1999.)

Assessment linking is not intended to spoon-feed; learners may still grapple with difficult questions and search for new insights, however, if they will know what the questions are and what the search entails, they can then plan their learning accordingly.

The following figure suggests how the various teaching elements of the content of external learning materials can be organised and linked to support assessment. From the objectives, through to the introduction, self-assessment, review activities and assignments, each element builds toward providing students with a learning environment which promotes persistence and success.

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3
Objectives	Objective	Objective
Introduction	Introduction	Introduction
Guided reading	Guided reading	Guided reading
Activity/questions	Activity/questions	Activity/questions
Self assessment	Self assessment	Self assessment
Model answer	Model answer	Model answer
Guided reading	Guided reading	Guided reading
End of section activity	End of section activity	End of section activity
↓	↓	↓
Assessment I	Assessment 2	Assessment 2

Table 1. Assessment Linking

Providing Feedback

Respond quickly to written work and praise students for what they have done well, not just with a few words like "well done" but with mentioning the particular strength of the work done. Your criticisms should be constructive, giving the student guidance on what can be done to correct the inadequacy or misunderstanding that is apparent in the work. Avoid sarcasm and a patronising or condescending tone and use simple language, high on encouragement and low on discouragement.

Model answers may be presented in print, audio or videotape (depending upon the type of assignment set). Preparation of model answers may also help you

- clarify assignment tasks and ensure that they are workable, and
- reducing the amount of marking time.

Audio conferences or voicemail can be used to provide students with feedback on their assignments and deal with common errors. You can leave voicemail messages for both individual students and the whole class. You may, for example, record a five minute outline of the main problems with an assessment item and how they may be overcome. (Refer to the TLC booklet on *Using Voicemail for Teaching and Learning*, Wylie, 1998.)

Email and email lists can be used to provide quick feedback and dialogue opportunities to students with online access. Exchanging assignments between students via email for critical comment and/or peer assessment can be useful especially if students can choose projects from a range of topics.

How Many Assignments?

Too many assignments will make it difficult for students to get marked feedback before preparing subsequent work. Two or three assignments are recommended for subjects requiring long written assignments if there are no final examinations.

More assignments may be considered if the subject lends itself to short assignments (for example, mathematics or science problems, multi-choice computer marked assignments). Shorter, more frequent (and easily marked) assignments can help motivate students and be used to progressively build skills. More frequent, smaller assignments are also appropriate if the target audience is unfamiliar with distance learning or tertiary study.

Initial assignments for the first year core subjects of a course should be designed to ease students into study, not to scare them off. Some lecturers provide a brief initial assignment that is not assessable or of low value. These give distance learners a 'safe' entry to assignment preparation.

Another strategy is to ask students to submit assignments in two sections. The first section is a brief outline of the assignment or a portion of the main assignment topic. This enables students to get feedback from their tutors and develop some confidence that they are on the right track before completing the whole assignment. Assessment may be apportioned to each section: say 25% for the outline and 75% for the rest of the assignment.

The time required for students to obtain resources can influence the size and number of assignments. Fewer, larger assignments should be set if an extensive literature search is required to give to students sufficient time to obtain and process the information (for example, literature review).

Setting Due Dates

While increasing use is being made of facsimile and electronic mail, studying by distance education will continue to rely on surface mail services for purchasing text books, borrowing library materials and submitting and returning assignments. Mail delivery times can vary considerably for students in different locations so that for equity, an assignment is usually accepted if its post mark is dated on or before the assignment due date.

Specify the posting date or the date by which it should reach the University. Students appreciate due dates being set after holiday breaks as this provides them with an opportunity to catch up with their studies (assignments due before a break provide the lecturer with time to mark and return assignments).

The due date for the last assignment should allow sufficient time for marking and return before exams. This is particularly important if the assignment and your feedback will aid students to prepare for their exams. If an assignment relies on the previous one for completion then a minimum of three weeks should be allowed between assignment due dates.

Coordinating the due dates of assignments with other subjects being delivered in the same semester should be encouraged wherever possible to avoid unnecessary peak workloads for students.

Assignment turn-around time

A number of distance education providers set their maximum assignment turnaround time standard at 14 days. The sooner it can be returned the better. The type of assignment, complexity of marking and the number of assignments to be marked all influence turnaround time.

The potential for early submission and fast assignment turnaround may cause problems for some subjects where cheating is possible.

You should give students an indication of your standard turnaround time, but you may need to inform them that assignments submitted early will be held until the assignment deadline.

Explicit guidance

The purpose of the assignment should be clear to students. Most distance learners are mature-aged and want to know why they should do an assignment and how it will benefit them in their occupation or further studies. Not only should the purpose of the assignment be explicit, student guidance should also be explicit. Tell students how to prepare for assignments.

When providing details about assignments the criteria for successful assignments and the weightings for individual components should be included. For example:

- 10% Relevance to topic/question
- 10% Essay structure/style
- 5% Presentation and spelling
- 30% Content
- 30% Problem analysis
- 5% Referencing
- 10% Resources used

Criteria for evaluation of 'content' and 'problem analysis' components should be specified; for example:

- evidence of relevant reading
- knowledge of basic concepts
- identification of the central issues of topics and their inter-relationships
- ability to develop a concise and coherent argument
- clearly defined aim, and
- logical development.

Study Groups

Encourage students to form self-help study groups. Learners in the same geographic location can obtain a 'geographic roll' from the University which will provide contact details of other students in the region. By forming a study group which can meet in a convenient location or via email, students can:

- pool resources and equipment such as books, journal articles, useful web sites
- provide support and feedback on assignment outlines
- meet to discuss set readings
- help prepare for tests and exams, and
- help reduce the sense of working in isolation.

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Appendix: Concept Map (Fraser, 1998)

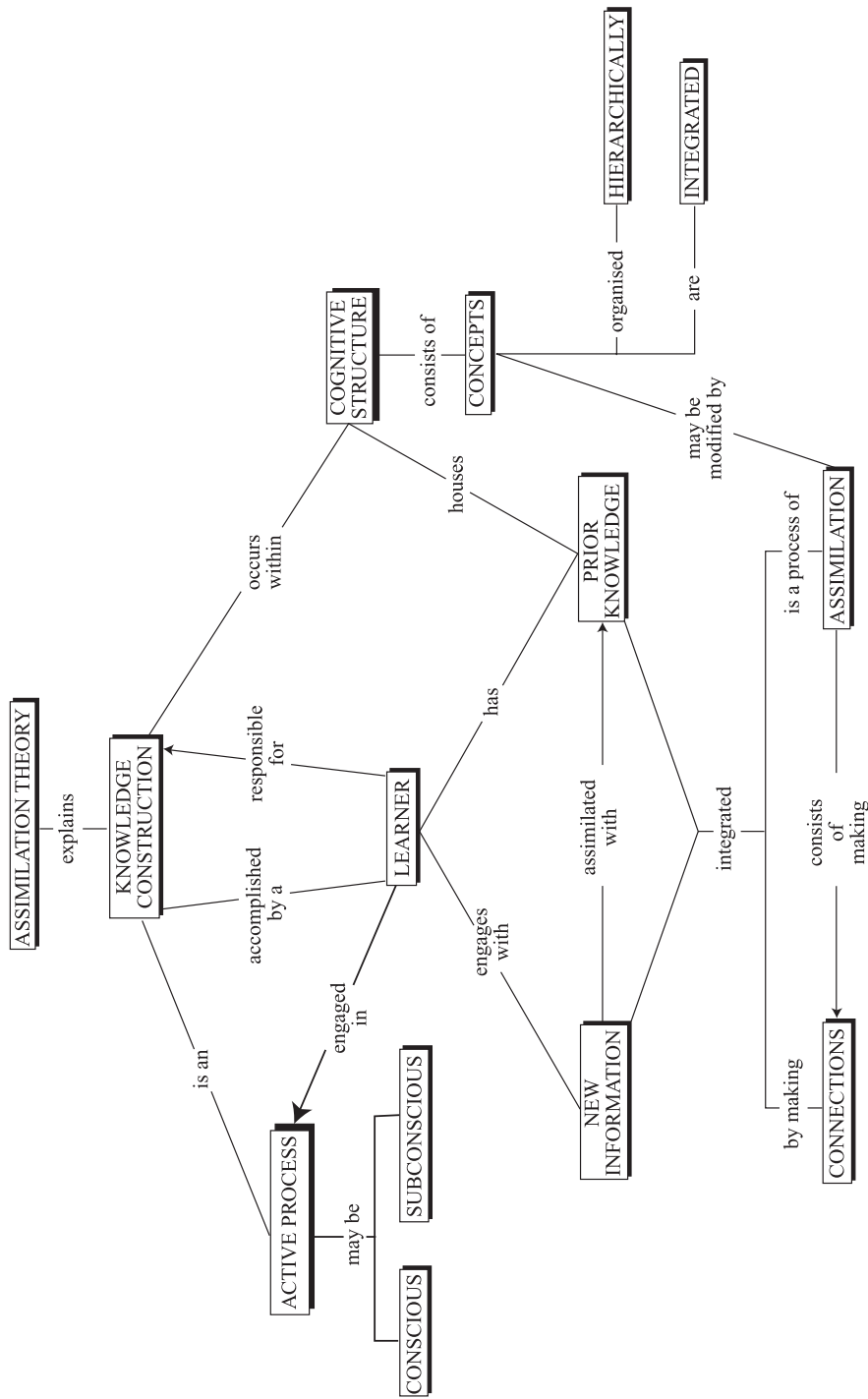


Figure 3. A concept map representing the author's understanding of the learning theory, Assimilation Theory (Ausubel, 1968).