

Delivering Multimedia to large classes

The predominant teaching style within higher education is largely didactic in nature, as Biggs (1999) notes, the lecture is the standard method for teaching large classes. Butler (1999) identifies several advantages to this approach; ensuring that all areas of curriculum are covered; potential to inspire through oratory; aids students understanding of complex terminology and difficult concepts can be clearly explained. However, there are several disadvantages such, as the diverse backgrounds of the students are ignored; the students are passive receivers rather than active learners; discussion is deterred; students direct questions to the lecturer and do not learn from each other. Butler (1999) also notes that, active learning research in medicine found that traditional lecture based teaching was not an effective method of transferring knowledge. As multimedia is a skills based subject, it is reasonable to assume that the principles and ideas behind active learning could be applicable.

Diana Laurillard (1997), indicates that the learning process must be a dialogue between student and teacher and should be discursive and reflective in nature rather than imparting knowledge. Biggs (1999), indicates that within ten to fifteen minutes of a lecture, students attention span drifts and learning drops. By actively encouraging discourse it could be seen that the lecturing role has moved towards facilitator rather than as a knowledge transfer agent. Brockbank and McGill (1998) note that this move towards facilitation in higher education enables learners to reflect, create understanding and connect their learning to reality. Laurillard (1997), suggests that the university lecturer must take responsibility for what and how their students learn and must therefore try to engage students more fully. Student's need activities to undertake to reinforce the learning experience and sharing ideas helps them with their own self-assessment (McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996). Examples recommended by Race & Brown (1998) include asking them questions, giving them something to do in the lecture or having small group discussions followed by plenary sessions. However, this method of teaching is perhaps not suitable for all topics, sometimes it will be necessary to return to the didactic approach, for example when teaching specific software techniques. It is important to vary the style of the teaching sessions, rather than relying on a single format.

The practicality of delivering the curriculum to large numbers of students has meant that it is necessary to use the didactic approach for the majority of lecturing sessions, simply to ensure that the curriculum is covered. However, it is important to note that in multimedia the practical sessions are very focused and form an integral part of the students learning. That is, they are given the opportunity to put into practice ideas, principles or techniques covered during the lecture. With the module staff on hand to help, guide and support this has proved to be an effective method of delivering the curriculum. Despite this, there is still a need to determine which other methodologies for improving student learning could be developed within the multimedia field.

Earwaker (1992), notes that there are two traditions of pastoral care within higher education, amateur and professional. The latter includes trained counsellors who work in the Student Union, Medical Centre or the Student Advice Centre and provide non-academic support as required. The former requires an academic to provide informal support across a wide range of issues, e.g. progress on a course, career advice or personal problems that affect their studies. In principle, this support should be for students identified within the academics tutor group. In practice though this is often not the case, as students often seek advice from tutors they see the most. Race & Brown (1998) make several suggestions for coping with students who have problems. For example, remember that you are not a trained counsellor and cannot solve all their problems, build up a list of experts and direct the students to them, and students with problems feel bad, so stop and be sympathetic. With pressure on academics to improve retention rates, it is important that students with problems are identified so that issues are resolved and they can continue with their course.

Habeshaw, Gibbs & Habeshaw (1993) note that, students put most of their effort into those elements of the course which are assessed. Assessment therefore motivates students to learn. Additionally, assessment tasks require students to make active use of information and skills they are studying. This active learning, i.e. Schuell's (1988) constructivist theory of learning, has been shown to be very effective. By using and developing the skills they have learnt, students can be more prepared for life after higher education, i.e. have enhanced employment or job satisfaction opportunities.

Whilst learning, it is important to receive encouragement. Davis (1998) suggests that positive encouragement is vital to ensure that learners want to continue with a course. Thus,

increased learning potential can be obtained if teachers engage in a positive dialog. It was important therefore during assessment periods that the entire teaching team is aware of the importance of positive feedback and that guidelines for assessment should be discussed prior to marking.

This paper has, I believe, reflected upon the delivery of multimedia to large classes and identified several key issues. It has noted that a diverse approach should be adopted towards teaching and learning strategies to facilitate student learning.

References

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