

## **My Theory of Online Learning – by Kris Sward**

My initial thoughts for an online learning model ranged from a fluid design where learners and teachers interacted with each other but also with the content that tied them together, to an umbrella shaped design where the core components were kept together under said umbrella and all sorts of information ‘rained’ down on the users to be incorporated into their learning (I abandoned that one because umbrellas tend to repel, not absorb, rain whereas I would hope the learner in my model would absorb information, not repel it!). Ideally I would lean towards connectivist principles in my own theory, where the sources of information were varied and teachers and learners worked through course content together. Both parties would thus build broader understandings of the subject matter while creating new avenues of thinking and learning. I suppose I am drawn to this way of thinking because of the vast resources and information currently available to my students and the fact that right now I am working with them to filter out the irrelevant and focus on and learn from the viable information available on the internet and other sources and build knowledge, relevance and perspective through a mass of seemingly unconnected pieces of information. That being said there are aspects of the behaviourist point of view in my theory because of the linear release of information, as well as the constructivist theory based on students ability to have input on the overall course direction and some aspects of it’s design, as well as them experiencing and applying outcomes from the course based on their individual study.

Being an online ‘newbie’ I struggled to wrap my head around this theory for a long time. I bounced ideas around and chose different models but finally settled (I think) on the following schematic:

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In this, my online learning theory, there is a continuum between the teacher and the student with the content (our PLOs, resources, collaboration tools, etc) standing in the middle. There is opportunity here for student to content interaction, as well as teacher to content, but also for student to teacher interaction with an additional side possibility of student to other student and teacher to other teacher interactions. The focus of teaching and learning would occur within the three core boxes – the teacher of the course is responsible primarily to his or her students and the student is primarily concerned with the course material, though knowledge and learning can be supplemented through collaboration with others in both cases. Though more visually linear, this theory ties into *The Community Model* presented in our readings (pg. 60-63, [\*Theory and Practice of Online Learning, Anderson, 2011\*](#)).

I see this theory being applied on a course by course basis (though it could be applied to a program such as ours) where students would initially interact with the instructor and content through a series of paced lessons that are released in sections. This content would include summative assessments of student learning, as well as formative assessments of student knowledge and course content which would allow for the continual tweaking or updating of the specific course. A variety of resources would be used to present information and outline areas of research, all of which would be engaging, current and easily laid out. Students could have the opportunity to present new information or resources into the mix as well. As the course (or program) progressed, new directions of study could be incorporated to further student learning and such continual reviews of the content would shape the course for future learners. Key aspects of the content portion of this model would include the design, delivery (including sequencing), evaluation and revision of the course itself and materials and information provided within the course. A major concern with this model could be the continual entry aspect of online learning – which could pose difficulties for students communicating effectively with each other as they would likely not be at the same place in their studies as their fellow students.

I see the student in this model being engaged by the content and delivery of the course and motivated to complete the course through identified learning outcomes and achievement. They can work independently or collaboratively with other students and they regularly engage with the teacher to discuss their coursework as well as the course content. They will also work through activities designed to foster their growth in the area covered by the course. Their feedback and success or struggles in the course can affect it's layout and design and they can bring new information to the attention of the instructor in order to assist in keeping the course current. In this respect the course is a continually evolving entity based on the information available at the time (another tie to connectivist principles).

The teacher in this case would facilitate the course and assist and support the students working their way through the subject material. They would continually re-evaluate the course content and delivery to see where they could improve, amend or update it, while maintaining its ties to the learning outcomes prescribed by the school or governing body who would be responsible for accrediting the course. This speaks to the

development of the content and I would see a process akin to the ASSURE model provided in our Powerpoint presentation where learning styles and learner knowledge is assessed and used to outline the objectives of the course, then content is developed, used and evaluated for its efficacy prior to the entire process being reviewed and revised if necessary. By the end of the course it would be the job of the teacher (primarily with some input from the students) to review how effective and relevant course materials were and further revise the structure or delivery of the course accordingly. Students will be able to identify the learning outcomes they achieved and apply their new knowledge to their practice.

Again, I am a self-professed newbie when it comes to online course delivery and design and hold a perhaps idealistic (and very un-tested) view of the online learning environment. I agree with the backward design principles provided in the Dick and Carey model as I believe in my own teaching, starting with the goal in mind is imperative to successful planning. Providing room for continual revision is also key because the information can change rapidly and as facilitators of learning we need to be able to adapt to new resources and information in order to improve the learning environment for our students. In my own learning (in this online environment that is so new to me) I do see us working as a cohort within this sort of schema to create, define, apply and revise our own practice. But I'm also open to many revisions!