Three Ways to Shift Instructional Practices to Meet the Needs of 21st-Century Learners

By Melora Sundt | Executive Vice Dean, USC Rossier School of Education
—*Co-Written with Brandon Martinez | Assistant Professor of Clinical Education, University of Southern California*—
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As technologies and class locations change, pedagogical changes must occur as well.

With our student populations becoming more and more non-traditional, our pedagogy could probably use a little dusting off and updating. In fact, let's start with shifting from talking about *pedagogy*, technically the instruction of children, to *andragogy*, the teaching strategies that address needs of adult learners. While the term andragogy has been around since the 19th century, it wasn't until the 1980s that the research on adult learners took off. Perhaps best known, Malcolm Knowles (1984), identified four principles of effective instructional strategies for adults: they involve the learner in the planning and evaluation of their learning; they use the learner's experience as the basis for learning (including mistakes); they establish the relevance of the learning to the learner's context; and they use problem-centered instead of content centered approaches.[1]

Since Knowles published his principles, we've experienced an exponential growth in the use of technology by non-traditional learners and learning environments. So in the suggested changes below, we merge Knowles' basic principles with a few promising instructional technology tools:

1. Minimize the Use of Lecture

Some students can learn from lectures, but most do not. There are innumerable ways other than lectures to facilitate learning – these are just a few of the most commonly used strategies.

> a) Record your lecture (use your webcam) and give it to students to watch *before class* as homework. If you try this, consider breaking the lecture into smaller units, and pose a question per unit that you want them to consider as they listen. In class, you can facilitate a discussion around those points.
> b) Assign short presentations by small student groups on simple topics on which you would otherwise have lectured. We like using the pecha kucha approach of 20 slides, 20 seconds per slide, for a total presentation of 6 minutes and 40 seconds. Note: this approach works best in more advanced courses where students have some prior knowledge about the topic.
> c) Open class with a problem related to the topic of the former lecture. Work through the problem as a group, establishing principles or fact families as you go.
> d) Find out what students already know. Polls can be done easily using cell phones and cloud-based software like PollEverywhere. Polls can be created by you on the fly, if necessary, to see how many actually understand the concepts from the reading, or heard the NPR story on your topic this morning, or think the best solution is "c."
> e) If you just can't let lecturing go, see the next point.

2. Familiarize Yourself With the Idea of Simultaneous Engagement

We use the phrase to mean the use of more than one structured conversation (with one of them typically tech-enabled) in a class at the same time. How it works:

> a) Create a Twitter hashtag (use # plus the course number, for example. For one of our courses in Hawaii the hashtag is #educ708HI). Participants need their own twitter account to participate. (This strategy can also be used with Facebook, Digg, etc).
> b) Make it available to students.
> c) Encourage them to post during and/or between class and set ground rules. Questions, links to related content, comments to support others' contributions in class, etc. are likely examples. Disagreements are welcome so long as they are civil.
> d) Monitor the contributions, and participate. If value is not created, then this avenue is not likely to last. Be sure to reference the "back channel" (Yardi, 2008) or as we call it "side or front channel" because it is a valued space for communication.

We find this strategy encourages the quieter students to contribute, encourages students to explore ideas more fully, and more students stay with you during the conversation. Granted, we've heard that for some of our colleagues, this practice is distracting and difficult to manage, but we've found that it gets easier quickly, and soon becomes a welcome source of contributions.

3. Prepare for the "Ubiquitous" Class

The ubiquitous class refers to the phenomenon of learning without time constraints. For example, if you try #2 above, and encourage contributions between class sessions, and participate, yourself, then you are moving towards a "ubiquitous" class. The learning doesn't stop just because the formal class session ended. Colleges that have placed faculty in residence halls have been seeding the ubiquitous class for centuries. There *is* a risk of creating an expectation that you are always available, but some expectation management at the start of class can generally manage that risk.

Ways to begin stopping your classroom clock include:

> a) Create a Facebook page or Digg or Twitter hashtag for your course and post to it whenever you see something related to your topic.
> b) Use (a) to provide opportunities for students to contribute the content. Since many students get twitter or other RSS feeds that provide legitimate resources, faculty need to value these and provide opportunities for them to be vetted and shared with the class.
> c) Consider mobile office hours. Holding office hours is no longer a classroom contingent endeavor. The days of fixed office hours bound by time an location often forced a student to chose between meeting with a prof or doing something else. Through mobile technology, "office hours" can be synchronous—in person, via Skype, via phone, or via chat, among others. Or, they can be asynchronous, via email or message board.

We're not trying to create more work for each other with these suggestions, but admittedly, if you are just starting out with any one of them, there is a learning curve. We do think the learning environment is changing for the better on our campuses, and that these strategies, along with many others, can facilitate rich learning experiences for us all.

References

[1] Christopher Pappas, "9 Tips to Apply Adult Learning Theory to eLearning," *eLearning Industry*, August 15, 2014. Accessed at http://elearningindustry.com/9-tips-apply-adult-learning-theory-to-elearning