

Replacing the Nods and Smiles: Raising Questions about Philosophy and Pedagogy in a Predominantly Web-based Master's Module

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INTRODUCTION This paper identifies and discusses the benefits and drawbacks experienced by students and lecturers in a Web-based/study guide Master of Education (MEd) module. The module had been offered face-to-face for three successive years and evaluative comments from the Master's students indicated they had found the content and structure well suited to their professional needs. Likewise, they appeared to have appreciated the pedagogical style of the lecturers—the two authors of this paper. However, in response to demand for greater equity of access, we redeveloped the module for what the MEd programme termed *flexible learning*.

For this flexible learning mode we provided students with three books of readings, an administrative guide, a study guide with structured activities, and opportunity for some face-to-face interaction, WebCT threaded discussion, a bulletin board, private e-mail, and voice mail. There was a requirement for participation in the WebCT discussion and structured activities, three mandatory written assignments, and one face-to-face seminar presentation. Through these means we hoped to

facilitate dialogue among our students and create a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The MEd has a professional focus and students enrolled in our paper included early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary teachers.

In this paper we explore the wide range of responses to our questions about students' perceptions of the philosophy that underpinned our pedagogical approach, the structure and content of the course, the effectiveness of the communication systems, and the IT service/support for the course. From these responses, we have asked ourselves some questions about how we might revise our principles and alter our pedagogy in order to better support our inability to engage in the nods and smiles that accompanied our face-to-face approach.

PRAGMATIC, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We had an institutional deadline to meet in developing and presenting our module for WebCT. In this regard, we made an assumption that the theories of

learning and teaching that informed our philosophy of practice and underpinned our pedagogy in our face-to-face module would transfer to our WebCT module.

In our face-to-face Master's module, we positioned all learning as underpinned by critical constructivist (Richardson, 1997) and social constructivist (Oosterheert & Vermunt, 2003) epistemologies. Our pedagogical approach also was based on principles of adult learning and teaching (Boud, 1993; Brookfield, 1986). These principles were the creation of an effective learning environment, self-direction in learning, self-assessment in learning, and the acknowledgement of prior experience and learning.

We wanted to create a welcoming and effective learning environment that would provide support and challenge to the cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions of the learning-teaching process (Dunlap & Grabinger, 1996). This is not to deny the potential for intrinsic political, philosophical, and psychological tensions that occur within educational contexts (Tennant, 1991). Within the learning environment we attempted to make provision for critically reflective practice (Smyth, 1989), equitable and inclusive practice (Ellsworth, 1992), deep learning strategies (Biggs, 1999), and the development of a community of practice (Price & Chen, 2003; Rogers, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

Given that this course was shifting from a face-to-face to a Web-based delivery, it was important also to consider theories pertaining to distance and online learning. One such theory is Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), which was first articulated by Michael Moore in 1972 (Moore, 1997). In presenting his theory of transactional

distance, Moore explained that *transaction* refers to the interplay between the environment, individuals, and patterns of behaviour. In relation to distance learning, there is a physical separation between the teacher and learner that creates a "psychological and communications space to be crossed" (Moore, p. 22). This space is known as *transactional distance*. Degrees of transactional distance are dependent on three variables, which Moore terms *dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy*.

Moore (1997) viewed dialogue in online communication as a positive interaction that is "purposeful, constructive and valued by each party" (p. 23). When dialogue is immediate, that is synchronous, the transactional distance is less than if the dialogue is not immediate or is asynchronous (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). In any face-to-face dialogue, the social presence of individuals is established through the immediacy of dialogue as well as nonverbal elements. In asynchronous online dialogue, social presence is the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally, through text, as real people in a learning community (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Social presence is crucial to the formation of a learning community (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rovai, 2002).

The establishment of a learning community facilitates dialogue among learners and lessens the feelings of isolation (Cereiyo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001; Curry, 2000) that many online learners experience. Wenger (1998) claimed that practice serves to bring coherence in a community, and it is through their practice that members form relationships with each other and with their tasks. Wenger asserted that in

order for practice to generate coherence within a community, the characteristics of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise must be present. The practice of our Master's students was based in education; they were all engaged in a Master of Education degree and had specifically enrolled in our course. We assumed therefore that there was a background of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise (Rogers, 2000; Wenger, 1998), and we anticipated that inherent to the structure of our course was the notion of a community of practice.

In the introduction to this paper, we outlined what we perceive the structure of our module to be. However, the structure of a Web-based module is also determined by the nature of the communications media employed, the philosophy and personalities of teachers, the personalities of the learners, and the constraints imposed by educational institutions (Moore, 1997). An important element within the structure is provision for teacher-learner dialogue. When a course is highly structured and teacher-learner dialogue is nonexistent, the transactional distance between learners and teachers is high. Conversely, in those courses where there is much dialogue and little predetermined structure, the transactional distance is low. Referring to an apparent relationship between dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy, Moore argued that the greater the transactional distance between teacher and learner, the more autonomy the learner would need to exercise.

From Moore's perspective, learner autonomy is "the extent to which in the teaching/learning relationship it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning

experiences, and the evaluative decisions of the learning programme" (Moore, 1997, pp. 26, 27). Nevertheless, he acknowledged that not all learners have the capacity to be fully autonomous. Moore found that students with advanced competence in learner autonomy appeared to be comfortable with less dialogic programmes and little structure, whereas those students who were more dependent learners preferred programmes with more immediate dialogue.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This was an exploratory piece of interpretivist and largely qualitative research (Sarantakos, 1993). Research in this tradition was chosen because it "is useful for developing an accurate picture of the research object" (Sarantakos, p. 7).

At the conclusion of the flexible Master's module and after formal assessment processes were finished, we invited all 14 of the Master's students enrolled in the module to engage in an exploratory study to help us gain insight into the effectiveness of our philosophy of online learning and teaching and the pedagogy of the module. We wanted to understand features of the module's structure and delivery that the students considered had supported and/or hindered their progress. Ten of the 14 students agreed to participate.

These ten participants were invited to complete a questionnaire based around statements representing our perceptions of how the module was presented. The participants indicated their perceptions of the learning environment of the module on a four-point Likert scale of definitely yes (DY, representing strong agreement), probably yes (PY), probably no (PN), and definitely no (DN),

representing strong disagreement). Where the participants made no response this was coded as NR. There was opportunity for qualitative comment as well. The questions were geared to elicit the participants' responses regarding the overall learning environment, the social constructivist approach, adult pedagogical principles, and technical aspects.

Following their completion of the questionnaire the participants were asked to indicate, separately in order to preserve anonymity, if they wished to participate in a focus group discussion (Fern, 2001) of the emerging themes. Five did so. One participant, who lived a considerable distance from the institution, agreed to be interviewed individually by telephone.

Questions for the semi-structured focus group interview were developed following analysis of the questionnaire responses (see Table 1). The discussion was taped with permission from the participants and transcribed by the researchers. Once transcription had been verified, the data were further analysed for emerging themes. Finally the researchers looked "selectively for cases that illustrate themes and [made] comparisons and contrasts" (Neuman, 2001, p. 243). Following analysis the developing report was returned to the participants for further verification.

FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

There were wide-ranging responses across the Likert scale for all questions, indicating diverse views of how the course was experienced (see Table 1).

Table 1 Responses to questionnaire

Section Focus	Question Focus	DY	PY	PN	DN	NR
Learning environment	1. Did learning environment meet expectations?	4	1	4	1	0
Social constructivist approach	2(i). Was learning sufficiently scaffolded?	2	5	2	1	0
	2(ii). Was there sufficient encouragement for online participation?	4	1	0	4	1
	2(iii). Was assignment feedback useful?	3	4	2	0	1
Adult pedagogical principles	3(i). Were there sufficient opportunities for self-direction in learning?	6	3	0	1	0
	3(ii). Were there sufficient opportunities for collaborative practice?	3	3	2	2	0
	3(iii). Were there sufficient opportunities for self-assessment?	3	2	3	1	1
Technical aspects	4(i). Would you prefer this to be a totally online course?	2	0	3	5	0
	4(ii). Could technical support be improved?	2	3	3	1	1

With respect to the learning environment, comments ranged from, "The study books and readings were fantastic" to "I did not achieve what I felt I could do as I didn't feel comfortable in asking for help as I did not know the lecturers well enough." One participant, who indicated a DN response to the learning environment question, said, "I had expected this to be an online course. I had very high expectations as I had done one online course before. This one had hardly any comments from lecturers, only students, which disappointed me immensely."

The second group of questions related to our teaching and learning approach which was underpinned by a social constructivist epistemology. The range of responses included, "I received adequate scaffolding when I asked for it—but sometimes I didn't know what to ask for," and "I would have liked more communication from the lecturers. I had to initiate any communication and only did so if really stuck."

With regard to encouragement for online participation, comments ranged from a desire for a greater face-to-face interaction:

I learn and achieve better in face-to-face situations where I can build rapport with my lecturer. The experience was too overwhelming and stressful trying to keep up with the responses needed online. A face-to-face session would have enabled me to more fully understand ...

to a pragmatic response, "[Online participation] was not part of assessment. I did not find enough time and rather concentrated on assessments."

The majority of the participants found the lecturers' feedback on assignments useful for the preparation of following assignments: "It [feedback] was excellent—pertinent and challenging." However some would have liked more contact with the lecturers so that "more direction/support before assignments were [due]" could have been given.

The module had been developed with adult pedagogical principles in mind and we were interested in the participants' responses to this aspect of the course. The majority agreed with the statement that there were sufficient opportunities for self-direction in learning to occur: "I liked the fact that we had options to choose from." One participant, however, felt that more guidance was required so that she/he would know they were on the "right path."

The participants found the opportunity for collaborative practice very useful both online and during personal meetings. However, the concept of collaborative practice was challenged by two of the participants who wondered if collaborative practice and self-direction are compatible, and whether working together to develop a seminar presentation truly represented collaborative practice.

When asked about notions of self-assessment, half of the participants agreed with the statement that there were sufficient opportunities to apply the notion of self-assessment in learning. One participant noted, "The scaffolding of the self-reflective exercises was really good." However, some appeared uncertain as to how much self-assessment had been required of them.

There were opposing views in the responses to a question asking if the course should become totally online. Most were happy to leave the course as it is currently structured and indicated that the course's face-to-face and online components had been well balanced. In contrast, one participant did not enjoy the online requirements of the course and would have preferred it to have been totally face-to-face. He/she commented:

I did not enjoy the online course at all. This is unusual as I thought at the start that it would offer me flexibility. In fact it did the complete opposite. For someone who loves ICT and is its biggest promoter, I found this form of learning, with no real personal interaction, really awful.

Another asserted that if the course is to become completely online, then, "The communication needs to be improved. Nothing beats a supportive smile and a reassuring word." In contrast, nearly half of the participants found the technical support and the lecturers' online interaction was "fine."

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Initial analysis of the questionnaire responses indicated that the aspects requiring further exploration could be gathered into four themes. These themes were the underpinning philosophies, structure and content of the module, communication systems, and provision of IT service/support. In reporting on the interview findings, we use pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity.

Underpinning Philosophies

Although the participants had not consciously viewed themselves as adult learners, they experienced the thrust

of the adult learning principles inherent in the module. Lily valued the opportunity for self-direction in learning and appreciated the enrichment that occurs when working collaboratively to co-construct knowledge and understanding:

Well I hadn't picked up about it being specifically adult learning, but I definitely felt right from the beginning that the responsibility for learning was on my shoulders. ... But I also felt that there was a really strong flow of co-constructivism in that we had to do a seminar with another person ... it converted me to co-constructivism—the wondrous effect of that extra perspective that gave me ideas that I would never have thought of before.

Lily also appreciated being treated as an adult learner:

I really appreciated you treating me as an adult learner. It has taught me something about how I should treat my adult learners—it was a sort of hidden message really.

Val liked having her professional experience acknowledged and being treated as an adult. She also found the initial focus on herself as a learner was a useful means of reflexivity:

I've found that this was one of those courses that actually treated you like an adult and a professional. ... I found really useful the activities that made me think, 'What kind of learner am I? How do I do my method of study?' I've gone back to it now because I'm actually thinking about how do I really learn—so in that sense it was quite reflective.

Tara also valued the initial focus on herself as an adult learner and appeared to appreciate the feeling of mutual engagement and joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998):

I felt it quite nice to see how different people from different areas were coming together and sharing their experiences. Too often you just sort of study with people of your own kind, being a secondary teacher or a primary teacher or whatever.

John enjoyed the independence that the module offered him; he could work in his chosen time frame and at his own pace. As a secondary teacher he had been wondering about the initial focus on adult learning in the module:

In fact I even noted down at one point I wasn't entirely sure why we were looking at the adult learning material—was it for the purpose of us as adult learners? Or was it expecting us to be working with adults ourselves? And actually it's probably both.

Jan was adamant about her preference for working on her own, but at the same time she expected more lecturer feedback:

I'm very happy working on my own ... but I think that I would have liked more feedback from the lecturers. I didn't feel like I got really any—other than the written feedback on assignments—which was excellent.

Structure and Content

The theme of module content was introduced to the interviewees. However, the interviewees quickly moved to a

discussion of the structure of the module rather than its content. For some the structure created a learning environment that was conducive to their learning style:

John: I loved the structure. I thought it was fantastic. I just loved it. In the end we came right into quite a narrow focus. We had to choose a topic and then we did the follow up with the research on that same topic.

Val: What I found really useful was the map of the course right at the start. The beginning activities slowly got us into doing what was to be done. But it was very progressive for people who were new to online learning, people who were new to actually assessing their own abilities. ... This course actually got me thinking about myself without worrying about someone looking at it [written reflections]. We felt safe that you were not going to look at what we were writing [referring to a section of the study guide that did not need to be posted for public perusal].

Participants indicated that they valued the study guide and books of readings. Jan said, "I think that those folders will be something that I will refer to over and over again. They were excellent. I really admired the way you presented those. They were fantastic." Val added, "They were a gift to us actually." Lily affirmed, "It was really helpful to have the study guide. You asked some very pertinent questions on some of the readings and I found that tremendously helpful."

However, Tara found that the structure of the module did not meet her expectations and hindered her learning:

I've decided one of my big problems was the structure and the time structure of the course. I found it very hard to deal with my way of life and to have all the discussions. The discussions were in the first half and then in the second half we were doing our assignments and that did not suit me at all. I felt I was struggling because I had to do a lot of work in a short time. I would have preferred to have it drawn out more and work on the assignment alongside.

Another aspect of the structure of the module that generated concern was the requirement for contribution to the group discussion via WebCT. In this regard, Jan missed the stimulation of face-to-face interaction:

A lot of my learning comes with discussing ideas. I found on the net that it didn't work for me. It did not trigger me and I didn't feel at all involved in the discussions. I tried hard initially but it was like the people that were discussing weren't on the same planet as me. That's probably an exaggeration in the sense that we weren't thinking along the same wave lengths ... to me that whole discussion thing was a non event for me. ... That took away from my learning.

Lily found that keeping track of the discussion was daunting for her and on occasions she resorted to personal e-mail as a preferred means of communication:

I found it really hard to have interchange of ideas. I would reply to someone and my reply would appear one-third at the top of the discussion—but I'd replied about

a fortnight later and ... I found that very confusing. ... When I really wanted to talk to someone I sent them a personal e-mail.

Tara also struggled with the requirement to engage in discussion:

I found the discussions hard. But I mean I was trying to catch up on discussion sort of between nine and ten-thirty at night time after I put my baby to bed and before he woke up for his next feed and that doesn't help either. But I got my husband to print off lots of them [discussions] and it's really hard to put it back together.

John on the other hand seemed to delight in the WebCT discussions:

It was difficult sometimes to follow the plot of one discussion. But I really loved it. I found it really interesting and looked forward to hopping on to the Web and seeing what was there next. I really liked it. ... I found it really quite exciting and invigorating in a funny sort of way.

A further structural issue was the time-consuming nature of the module for some of the participants. The interviewees all agreed that they would have "easily done between 250 to 300 hours' work" on the module. Jan, like Tara, found participating in the discussions arduous:

It was hugely time consuming, hugely. Far more time consuming than coming in, I'm convinced. I'm a teacher at school without a computer in my classroom. So I would have to go home at night and

do it, or in the weekend. ... I would remember spending an hour and a half on a Sunday morning précising something. I mean even that, you know, was time consuming.

Others managed their time differently. They thought about the time they might have spent on a face-to-face module and decided the flexible mode of delivery offered different options for use of time.

Communication Systems

The third theme arising from analysis of the interviews was linked to communication. It appeared that face-to-face interaction was an important element in the theme of communication for a number of the participants. Jan disclosed, "I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm an extrovert and extroverts like communication. You know introverts quite like sitting and reading." Val commented, "Once I had met everyone face-to-face it was just different after that. I found that I just wanted to contact people." Tara not only missed the face-to-face element but also considered that she had insufficient online communication from the module lecturers:

I just didn't have much in the way of contact with you two. I felt if it had been every Wednesday night at the Institution I'm sure we would have had lots more communication with you than we actually did. So in that sense the online part wasn't utilised as well as I would have needed it.

All of those interviewed would have liked more guidance on how to construct literature reviews and carry out case studies, and on what we were "looking for" in each assignment. For example, Lily said, "I would have found it helpful

to have been given sub-headings for my case study. I found the Web really helpful for literature review—just the addresses of sites would be helpful." Val explained, "When you use terms like *case study* those are terms you wouldn't know if you hadn't done any research before you started your Master's course."

IT Service and Support

Some members had difficulty in accessing the Web site initially, but their calls for help were quickly addressed. The threaded discussion presented difficulties for most members. Lily suggested that the reason for confusion was "because quite a lot of people didn't understand that you have to reply to someone to continue the conversation." Through the focus group discussion, it was found that some members did not receive all of the communications that had been addressed to them, including private e-mails. The group considered that a tutorial prior to the commencement of the module would have been helpful for those who were unfamiliar with online work.

DISCUSSION As indicated by the participants' responses, student reaction to this module was very individual and appeared to arise from previous learning experiences. Although we wished to create a welcoming and effective learning environment that provided support and challenge, the students' level of response to this approach appeared to be impacted by their personal and professional dispositions and circumstances. Some of these Master's students operated well within the structure of the module; others found the transactional distance too great and wished for considerably more lecturer social presence than had been organised. Some appreciated having learner autonomy in respect to time

of engagement and direction of study; others seemed to need a more structured learning environment with greater lecturer dialogue. Some previously independent learners came to value the learning that occurs within a community of practice and became converts to a co-constructivist aligned pedagogy; others were confused by the in-built constructivist structure of the module and did not recognise the scaffolded interaction structured into the Study Guide. It also appeared that, for many of the students, the first-time experience of Web-based learning hindered their capacity to engage in the community of practice inherent in the structure of this module. For a few, the opportunity to engage in online dialogue, and to interact with the ideas of others, was enthusiastically embraced and found to be invigorating.

The majority of the students appreciated being treated as professional people who were capable of self-directed learner autonomy (Moore, 1997). Many of the students specifically mentioned how much they enjoyed the feeling of independence (Boud, 1993) that this flexible-learning module offered them. Yet, it was evident that the majority of our students would have liked more social presence (Moore, 1997) from us as module lecturers. Technology offers opportunities for immediate response to questions and comments from participants, but in many instances this immediacy may not be possible due to lecturers' other work commitments (Clinedinst, 2004). Clearly, we did not meet all of our students' expectations with regard to the frequency of our asynchronous dialogue.

A number of our students mentioned their preference for face-to-face

interaction. They perceived that such interaction provides opportunities for the immediate dialogue that can lessen learner isolation (Cereijo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001; Curry, 2000). Apparently, for these students, our online learning approach lacked the community and social interaction that develops in a face-to-face class (Sinclair, 2003). It seemed that in a few cases learner isolation had not been sufficiently quickly recognised and that this tardiness had weakened the development of our community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The expressed wish for a closer contact with the lecturers challenged both our philosophical and pedagogical notions relating to adults as autonomous learners that underpinned the development of this module.

We suggest that a high degree of transactional distance has the potential to impact upon cognitive processes relating to the co-construction of knowledge. The students in the study, all teachers, indicated they understood the principles of the co-constructivism embedded in the structure of the module (Richardson, 1997). However, the findings from the study indicated that not all were able to act within this framework. The vigorous and intellectually challenging debate required for a truly critical constructivist informed pedagogy to be enacted was not fully developed or sustained. Reasons for this are complex and may include greater transactional distance arising from patterns of asynchronous dialogue (McInerney & Roberts, 2004; Moore, 1997).

Another in-built aspect of the module structure was the notion of self-assessment. We had hoped that, through opportunity for reflection and problem solving, the students would increase

their ability to assess their own work and identify means of developing their knowledge and expressing their ideas (Rovai, 2002). It seemed that for some students the idea of self-assessment simply meant checking to see if they were up-to-date with discussion postings and assignments. On the other hand, the high standard of work presented by some of the students indicated that they had benefited from the reflective and problem-solving activities inherent in the module structure and had increased their capacity for self-assessment. We accepted that individual response to a module may vary dramatically due to differences between participants in motivation, personal characteristics, participation, and personal effectiveness (Price & Chen, 2003). This variability in response to a module is no different for a Web-based module than for a face-to-face mode of delivery.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

On the one hand we had some feelings of success on hearing Val's summation on the flexibility that this module had offered. She said:

If you look at the course in context it gave us flexible learning. There was face-to-face, we met as a whole class and there were presentations, we could collaborate on assignments, we had the option of going online for discussion, and the option of contacting each other individually as well. There were lots of modes to work with.

On the other hand, when we reflected on Lily's comment, "Nothing beats a supportive smile and a reassuring word," we realised that we needed to find a means of replacing the nods and smiles of a face-to-face interaction in order to

create a more effective dialogue with our online students. We were prompted to ask some questions about how we, as lecturers for the module, might deliver high-quality programmes with positive learning outcomes for students studying at a distance from our institution. Such questions include:

- How can we quickly establish social presence through facilitating an understanding of all participants as "actual" social and emotional beings?
- What is the best way to lessen the impact of transactional distance on less autonomous learners in a learning context using asynchronous communication?
- Within the structure of the module, do we need to emphasise the three in-built modes of dialogue—with lecturer, with each other, and with the study guide?
- What level of learner autonomy might be assumed/expected for online Master's modules?
- What is the best way to quickly gauge learner autonomy in order to meet individual differences of the students and the requirements of a Master's module?
- How can we affirm or guide in small, ephemeral ways students' contributions to an asynchronous co-construction of knowledge without influencing the process too strongly?
- What is the best way to recognize symptoms of isolation and lessen the emotional impact that this has on learning?
- How can we as lecturers replace the nods and smiles common in a face-to-face lecturing environment? Could we perhaps add "emoticons" (Salmon, 2000) to our postings?

CONCLUSION In this study we examined the effectiveness of the delivery of a Web-based module from the perspectives of ten Master's students. The module had been taught face-to-face for a number of years and we, as lecturers, had had the opportunity to refine our face-to-face practice based on reflection and ongoing feedback from student participants. The findings from this, our first-time Web-based delivery, showed that while some students appreciated the content and delivery of the module, others would have liked more social presence from us to guide and support their learning.

A small-scale case study such as this has its limitations due to the fact that it was restricted to the perspectives of ten participants in one Master of Education module. However, a strength of this study is its richness of data. We have made no attempt to generalize these findings and leave the significance-making to the reader. It should also be emphasised that this was our first venture into Web-based presentation of the module. Both lecturers and students were new to this mode of learning and teaching. Unfamiliarity with online learning may have limited the participants' responses to our complex research questions, as they had no previous experience of this module upon which to base their perceptions.

Since reflecting on the students' responses to the questions we asked, and in gaining greater insight into the research literature on distance learning, we have taken steps to refine our Web-based pedagogical practice. We offer the findings on our beginning experiences as encouragement to others to ensure that principles of distance learning, derived from a comprehensive study of the

distance learning literature, are soundly incorporated into their philosophy of teaching prior to presenting any Web-based course.

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