

# **“TEACHING OUTSIDE THE BOX”: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?—IN SEARCH FOR A NEW PARADIGM FOR “TEACHING AND LEARNING”**

Thomas Mengel, University of New Brunswick

## **Introduction**

Faculty teach and students learn. Higher education starts from the premise that there is a gap “between the teacher’s understanding and the student’s learning” (Boyer, 1990, p. 23) that needs to be bridged by teaching. However, the context of higher education is changing and thus innovative pedagogy and a potential change of paradigm should reflect this.

Increasingly “non-traditional students” engage in higher education (Steele, 2010). They bring a wealth of life and work experiences to the fore. Further, the complexity of our daily lives is increasing. Hence, in any given learning process all participants experience gaps to be bridged and thus fluidly move from a position of learner to one of helping others to learn. Unfortunately, our educational language and practice do not yet appropriately reflect that.

## **Critical Reflection on the Existing Paradigm of Teaching (and Learning)**

We perceive teaching and learning as knowledge transfer from those who know to those who do not know (King, 1993; Sunnarborg, 2008). The complexity of the context of teaching and learning, however, has outgrown the simple model of the teacher as the (only) knowledge expert that still is so ingrained in our educational institutions and practices.

While various promising innovative teaching styles and approaches have successfully been applied in higher education for many decades, a simple walk through most Canadian universities and colleges suggests that these pedagogical innovations over hundreds of years have not substantially changed the prevailing image (or “box”) of teaching and learning. As was the case in many medieval classrooms, many “modern” classrooms still look like “boxes” and the teacher still is clearly separated from the student audience.

Further, in educational institutions, those who know are still called teachers, educators, professors, instructors, lecturers or readers; those who acquire knowledge are called students —or learners at best. While some changes have shifted the focus from understanding students as those who don’t know to learners who are actively involved in the process of knowledge acquisition and distribution, the general educational practice of teaching and assessment still reflects the unidirectional or top-down approach to teaching and learning. Even a flipped classroom is still a classroom (“box”), unless we increasingly start expanding the pedagogy of experiential learning (where much of the learning happens outside the “classroom” and is being reflected on, discussed and interpreted interactively “in class,” fluidly dissolving the boundaries between teachers and learners).

## Indications of a Changing Paradigm of Teaching (and Learning)

The lack of substantial progress in providing more flexible learning spaces is particularly surprising given that even hundreds of years ago other models of learning outside the box were available, as described by the model of Plato's Academy, where members of the Academy learn and teach together without a clear distinction between teaching and learning roles (Dancy, 1991). Further, current concepts of learning commons pick up similar conceptualizations of learning together in dynamic and different set-ups (Holmgren, 2010). However, still only few Canadian institutions of higher education have implemented substantially different teaching concepts that experiment with other terms also, e.g., coaching, integrating, facilitating. Considering the two following examples and underlying innovative models of teaching, it is high time to break free from the dominating paradigm and to move outside the box.

First, at the Center for Innovative Management of Athabasca University, teaching is called "academic coaching"; academic coaches "facilitate active discussion and collaboration among students by guiding conversations and providing new information, insights or tools to help clarify particular points or themes in a course." Rather than lecturing, they "facilitate interactions that lead to a high level of peer-to-peer learning among students who are experienced managers from a broad spectrum of organizations, industries and geographic locations" (Athabasca University, n.d.).

Second, at Renaissance College, UNB's faculty of interdisciplinary leadership studies instructors are called "integrators"; in the context of learning outcomes they facilitate the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes of students (Mengel, forthcoming; see also: Mengel & Zundel, 2007).

Both approaches highlight the concept of facilitation, often introduced in the context of problem-based learning, where "teacher and students co-construct the instructional agenda in a student-centered environment [and where] the teacher's role is to facilitate collaborative knowledge construction" (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006, p. 21).

Concepts of collaborative distributed learning where a subset of distributed and local learners and communities connect in their learning process or project further push the role of the traditional course instructor towards facilitation of learning processes and integration of various learning experiences (Laferriere, Venkatesh, & Paquelin, 2014). Further, "blended learning" integrating online and face-to-face learning approaches put the "community of inquiry" at the center stage with the premise "that higher education is both a collaborative and individually constructivist learning experience" (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013, p. 10) where teachers learn and learners teach. Finally, "in peer learning [the roles of teacher and learner] are either undefined or may shift during the course of the learning experience" (Boud, Cowen, & Sampson, 2001, p. 4).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Considering promising examples of innovative approaches to teaching, it is time to break free from the existing paradigm, without relinquishing the responsibility of facilitators to learn to guide, challenge, and

assess, and without frustrating learners' expectations of—and appreciation for—the expertise and experience of facilitators of learning. We should be more cognizant of how our teaching and learning language might cement the outgrown dichotomy between “teachers” and “learners” rather than support the dynamics of communal, collaborative, or peer learning. However, simply replacing terms may not suffice to change the underlying pedagogy. Innovating pedagogical approaches and teaching outside the box may prove difficult without a change of the mindset and corresponding practice.

In particular, I suggest working on:

- creating an effective dynamic learning environment “outside of the box” that better accommodates the various needs and experiences of learners; and
- more fluidly involving various stakeholders in learning processes and to seamlessly switch roles between the traditional “teaching” and “learning.”

More consistently engaging all involved in a learning community certainly is worth the effort.

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### **Author Biography**

Thomas Mengel, Ph.D. (tmengel@unb.ca) is a professor of leadership studies and integrator at Renaissance College (UNB). Before joining UNB in 2005, Thomas held various project management and leadership positions and worked as an entrepreneur and consultant in different European and North American organizational contexts. He is particularly interested in leadership, project management and social entrepreneurship education.