

## 'Mode Neutral' pedagogy

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Brian Smith [smithb@edgehill.ac.uk],

Peter Reed [reedp@edgehill.ac.uk],

Chris Jones [jonesch@edgehill.ac.uk],

Edge Hill University, St Helens Road,

Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 4QP, UK

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### Abstract

In an attempt to create truly flexible Higher Education courses that can effectively recruit from the wider market, whilst still reducing the demands placed upon academic staff we have stumbled across Mode Neutral - a pedagogical method to consider for the development and unification of face-to-face, online, and blended courses. Mode Neutral is a method that allows students to progress across modes of delivery at any point throughout their study when their preferences, requirements, personal and professional commitments demand, without compromising their learning experience. In the development of sample modules we have adopted and considered researched educational theories such as social constructivism, active learning, and communities of practice. Although research is ongoing, we have highlighted three essential factors for Mode Neutral success; the Role of the Tutor, Curriculum Design, and the mechanisms in place for Communication for Learning. Early findings have shown development of student Information, Communication and Technology skills, their confidence, and interaction across modes of delivery. The success of Mode Neutral readdresses how all stakeholders perceive both traditional and online courses, offering opening access to higher education in a hitherto unimaginable way.

### Keywords

Mode Neutral, elearning, pool of reflection, communication for learning, role of the tutor.

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### Introduction

There is increasing pressure for Higher Education courses to provide enhanced flexibility for students. This pressure could stem from demands for a more favourable work-life balance, and in turn provides the opportunity for wider recruitment. Landsberger (2004, p8) reminds us that;

*"learners increasingly will be from different backgrounds. They will desire and require flexibility in the ways that they study, the resources they use, the sorts of activities that they do and the ways in which they interact and communicate"*

Regardless of the many sources of pressure, institutions have begun adopting elearning solutions for blended or distance learning programmes, in hope of providing 'anytime anyplace' education.

Despite the euphoria surrounding elearning in education, numerous attempts have failed for different reasons. For example, academics have historically developed separate materials for classroom and online learners, potentially treating the various modes of delivery as completely different programmes of study. Developing and maintaining the different versions of courses based upon modes of delivery, is obviously time consuming for academics and administrative staff. Unsurprisingly therefore, those attending the physical classroom often receive a markedly different experience to their online counterparts.

This paper attempts to illustrate our experience, discovery and early research findings of a new method of pedagogy for both classroom and online learners. Business drivers, student experience and staffing resources have been considerations at the forefront of this development, which proposes the flexibility to capture the wider market and provide a rich learning experience for all students, irrespective of the mode of delivery, whilst at the same time, reducing the developmental demands on the tutor.

We argue that it is possible to adopt a singular pedagogical approach to educational programmes that is suitable for all learners. The introduction of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in this approach is not just a hosting area for content and communication, but instead seen as the 'new whiteboard' in the classroom, a place where all materials are accessed across the various modes of delivery. This is a direct attempt to create a unified learning experience, regardless of delivery mode, however in no way suggesting the learners are identical nor suggesting each student will gain identical benefits. Instead, it recognises their uniqueness and provides an equal learning experience, regardless of mode of delivery at any particular point during study, and despite their inherent instructive design (Salmon 2002), suggests neutrality can be achieved with, and within a VLE.

This neutrality is achieved firstly, through the unification of courses that have previously been segregated based upon delivery mode. This allows students to register for one programme, yet have flexibility over how they study. Curriculum design therefore, must be focussed to provide interaction among the collaborative learning group as well as fluidity of movement across modes. Through providing rich communication in a variety of forms, control over the learning process is shifted onto the learner, with opportunities for reflection encouraging the learner to exercise their discretion to attend the physical classroom, attend online or a mix of both.

We have named this method 'Mode Neutral' pedagogy (Smith, Jones, Reed, 2007). Although research is ongoing, we are convinced that it offers a way of unifying the learning experience for all in whatever mode of study they choose, allowing institutions to recruit from the wider market and reduce development workload on academics.

## Philosophical underpinnings of Mode Neutral

Mode Neutral pedagogy draws upon constructivist approaches alongside Duffy & Cunningham's (1996) view, that the learner should take responsibility for knowledge construction rather than passive learning by instruction. Indeed, this mirrors the view by Lefoe (1998) that learners are unique and should welcome the chance to contextualise their learning by doing rather than by simple acceptance of information. In keeping with social constructivist views (Vygotsky, Dewey, Mayer), we believe that this is best achieved through an active and engaging process with other learners as well as subject materials, thus encouraging the sharing of experiences through debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks linking subject material to application in practice. It is important to note that these processes and activities are directly aligned to learning outcomes and assessments (Biggs 2003).

In keeping with Mode Neutral design, this is true for all learners across the different modes of delivery as both classroom and online environments align with Gray's (1997) notion of a constructivist classroom;

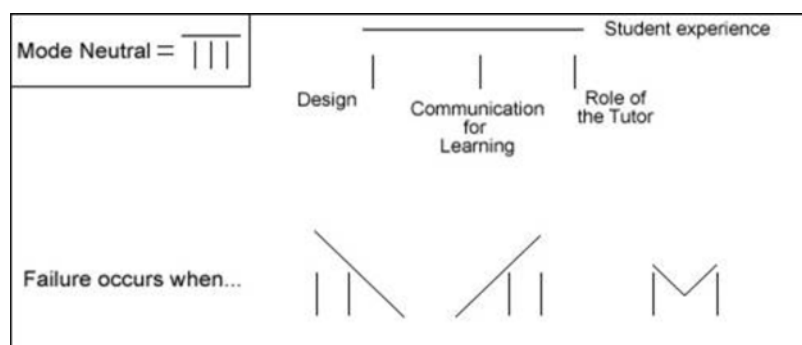
*"The environment is democratic, the activities are interactive and student centered, and the students are empowered by a teacher who operates as a facilitator/consultant."*

In developing courses utilising Mode Neutral pedagogy, we have concluded that there are three essential components:

- The way in which the curriculum is designed (**CD**);
- The role of the tutor in delivery or guidance of curriculum content in order to meet learning objectives (**RT**);
- Mechanisms are in place for learners to construct knowledge through social interaction (Communication for Learning - **CL**).

We express the potential learning/student experience by a simple equation **SE = CD + RT + CL**

With the two overarching philosophies of (social) constructivism and constructive alignment to Mode Neutral, the three components (CD, RT & CL) are critical to providing an effective learning experience across modes of delivery. If any component has instability within the pedagogical model then this would have a direct consequence on the overall learning experience.



**Figure 1.** the reliance upon the 3 strands of Mode Neutral development

Further underpinning philosophies of Mode Neutral can be more effectively highlighted through the explanation of the 3 components.

## Curriculum Design

The challenge is in designing a programme structure that allows the learner to freely migrate from one mode of delivery to another, and back again, without compromising the learning experience. A further challenge is to create a single environment in which all learners have a single membership or sense of belonging; in line with Wenger's notion of Communities of Practice (1998), whereby groups of like-minded people can shape and assist in each others construction of knowledge and understanding relating to a specific domain. This notion is extended across delivery modes as all participants, regardless of the way in which they interact with module content, do so in a single community of practice.

As previously indicated, the student experience across delivery modes is channelled through the VLE. Its introduction in the classroom allows the designer to create 'one window' for the single learning community, encouraging learners and tutors to interact freely amongst others within the community of practice, as well as with identical and rich learning materials across each of the modes. This approach continues to be illustrated in the notions of Anchored Instruction (Forster 2004) where all learners can communicate across the modes by using realistic situations to solve complex interconnecting issues, by employing reflective, problem solving and critical thinking skills. In some cases, guest speakers deliver content within the classroom that is simultaneously streamed for online students. These sessions are also available on-demand for students to re-view and re-construct.

These design features directly challenge traditional approaches to teaching and learning that are based upon instruction and receipt of brief lecture notes taken from PowerPoint slides. This method relies on the student to learn from their recall of the teaching session, as handouts typically contain brief bulleted pointers, primarily serving to keep the tutor focussed on prompts rather than delivery of knowledge and understanding. They do not encourage community belonging, and leave the learner in need of further support and clarification for understanding and practical application, and as such, their use outside the classroom environment is questionable.

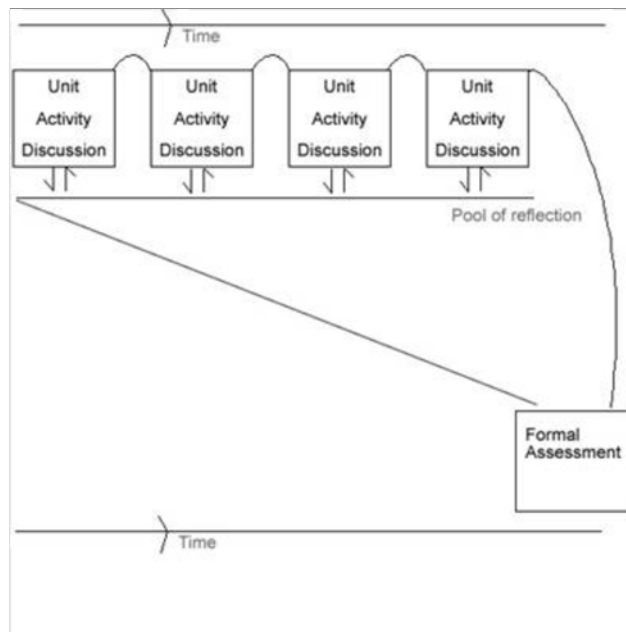
Another key consideration within Mode Neutral curriculum design calls on work conducted in psychology, skill acquisition and learning theory (Vygotsky 1978) suggesting learners can more easily digest information, reflect and construct knowledge through information '**chunking**'. This notion is mirrored in

Mode Neutral where the curriculum content is chunked into a number of 'units of learning'.

To give pace and opportunities for critical reflection, as well as to assist in promoting student ownership of learning, each unit of learning is time released before the classroom sessions. Units are built upon a theme, sometimes including recurring elements and a related activity, encouraging collaborative discussion among learners across delivery modes (Figure 2). This aligns with Moon's view (2005, p165) of reflection for learning, based on the premise that "*reflection does not necessarily just happen but that conditions can be structured to encourage it to happen*".

Although units appear self contained including information, communication and reflection, they can be linked together to create a more continuous learning experience through the inclusion of recurring elements. For example, a pilot educational programme in health studies introduced 3 fictitious patients, with units of learning making continuous referrals, sometimes through activities, to their state and treatment.

This design encourages the realisation and development of a '*Pool of Reflection*' (Figure 2). We hypothesise that the pool of reflection will initially be limited due to the lack of contextual knowledge and understanding. Its development is generative of engagement with module content, activities and collaborative discussion and naturally therefore, will develop and become '*deeper*' throughout the course of study whereby further opportunities for engagement unfold. Students are then likely to '*dip into*' their Pool of Reflection to inform and construct academic assignments for submission. This notion works to nurture students into the concept of Communication for Learning, a point that will be expanded further.



**Figure 2.** Chunking of content in units of learning and 'pool of reflection'

## Communication for Learning

Traditionally, conversation was viewed as the transmission and receipt of verbal information between individuals in a face-to-face environment. Today in a Digital society, Higher Education students are already using technologies that cater for distance communication (Breen et al 2001). The ability to simultaneously communicate with fellow learners online using the VLE, may also be assisted through additional devices such as SMS (text) messaging, Instant Messaging, Voice over IP (VoIP), Podcasts and Web Cams. These devices open the learning experience in a hitherto unimaginable way. Learners using the VLE along with these additional devices can enrich the learning experience for fellow classroom and online learners.

In social constructivist teaching and learning, communication is used to motivate all learners to collaborate and challenge one another's understanding. Communication for Learning represents the notion that participants can discuss, reflect, construct, and often re-construct their knowledge and understanding of subject matter. Mode Neutral pedagogy mirrors this notion, allowing communication methods such as asynchronous discussion to play a central role in the learning experience, and scaffolding (Vygotsky) of knowledge and understanding within the community of practice. For many students, discussion enables a deeper understanding of subject matter and therefore, particular emphasis is placed upon designing environments as well as content, conducive for this to occur and naturally leading to the development of the pool of reflection.

The design of Mode Neutral programmes, whereby students are free to move across modes of delivery help reinforce Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice. Furthermore, mechanisms for communication for learning, encouraging the collaborative communication across modes of delivery, underpin Moon's (Reference) notion of Community Scaffolding. This builds upon Vygotsky's work as it is the peers within the community of practice that help scaffold each others learning and construction of knowledge and understanding. In the example given earlier, whereby 3 fictitious patients were introduced, learners debated upon the most appropriate treatment for each patient through synchronous and asynchronous discussions, underpinned by clinical evidence. These discussions informed students' scaffolding of knowledge and understanding.

Using the VLE as the new white board within a classroom environment helps to contextualise learning by sharing more than one person's opinion on a topic. This can be used to broaden a discussion or even highlight issues that may have not already been picked up on in the classroom environment. It also allows a student who has attended a classroom session, to visit the online discussion to further consolidate understanding and likewise, the tutor can summarise the classroom session for the online students. Not only does this start to promote a singular pedagogical approach, it also embraces the skills of reflection among many learners, promoting knowledge construction and re-construction.

Absence of communication will undoubtedly alter any learning experience adopting social constructivist elements to the point that knowledge construction may never occur. Therefore all learners should be made aware that participation in both synchronous and asynchronous communication is beneficial for reflection and construction of knowledge and understanding. Likewise, a great deal is also expected in the role of the tutor when adopting Mode Neutral methods in developing and delivering programmes of study.

## The role of the tutor

In constructivism, the unique nature of the learner is important placing them at the centre of the learning experience. From this perspective, the role of the tutor in a constructivist approach must be considered relative rather than absolute, in that the role will depend heavily on the needs and aspirations of the individual student at any particular point during their course of study.

Mode Neutral applies Salmon's 5 Stage Model (2000) to the Role of the Tutor, suggesting initial aspects of course delivery involve heavy guidance from the module leader (stages 1 & 2). In these initial, introductory moments of the module there may be a relatively high requirement of the tutor to take a more instructive role in module delivery. Students may need help in overcoming technical difficulties using the VLE and any other tools being used. They may also require help in overcoming diffidence in projecting their own views, experiences, and beliefs.

Mode neutral emphasises an early withdrawal by the tutor into a supportive and a loosely guiding role, posing questions and hinting at ways in which a debate may be developed. The tutor's involvement in debate will largely focus around offering a facilitated approach to learning rather than instructive. Student interaction, collaboration, and mutual support increase throughout the module so that by the end the student is self-directive and reliant (stages 4 & 5).

## Our early research findings

- In the early stages of the pilot course, students within a local geographical distance from the hosting institution preferred to attend classroom (face-to-face) sessions. However, upon realisation of an equal student experience across delivery modes through curriculum design and mechanisms for communication for learning, there was a movement of 35% of classroom learners to online learners.
- The design has also welcomed a high-level of communication, seen through the learners' engagement of the content and activities online. On average, asynchronous discussion topics contained around 130 postings (100-200 words of critical analysis and reflection) across units of learning
- Salmon's 5-stage model (2000) has been reflected in the pilot module as learners have shown that as both time and units of learning progress, they are increasingly confident and able to engage with online materials. Around 35% of students possessed little, if any IT skills at the beginning of the pilot course. Toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester, these students were actively engaging in online materials and communication. The 5 Stage Model suggests that the process finishes when students reach stage 5, when they are looking for benefits to "*achieve personal goals*" (Salmon, 2000, p29). Actions by some of the learners within the pilot module infer that they have reached a point in their personal and professional development, whereby they are not only interested in achieving their personal goals, but almost act in a peer-mentoring fashion. This evidence supports Moon's Community Scaffolding. Online communication has allowed students to make suggestions and provide direction for peers in both construction of knowledge and its application in a professional setting. Perhaps a sixth stage is emerging to Salmon's model – the peer mentor.
- Learners have shown a tendency to return to previous units of learning in order to contribute to discussion, reconstruct and further feed into their own and others pools of reflection. This notion of 'altered perspectives' is supported by Mezirow's perception of 'Transformative Learning' (1991) whereby one's assumptions and beliefs are altered through critical reflection. Is this behaviour irrespective of one's personal progression through maturity, or is this dependent on both the personal and professional stage the learner has matured to through prior experience etc (as seen in the CPD students in the pilot module)? Further research could investigate this area.
- Is the success of any constructively aligned programme of study, dependent upon particular skills of the tutor? Can any academic effectively guide students through module content in the relaxed 'guide on the side' manner, allowing students to socially construct?

## Summary

In summary, this article has proposed a new pedagogical method to consider for the development and unification of face-to-face, online, and blended courses. Mode Neutral is a method that allows students to progress across modes of delivery (face-to-face, online & blended) at any point throughout their study when their preferences, requirements, personal and professional commitments demand, without compromising their learning.

Mode Neutral offers flexibility and alignment of needs, preferences, and learning styles for students to assume personal ownership in the construction of knowledge and understanding. Flexible movement and engagement across the modes of delivery is achieved through curriculum provision within a single learning community (VLE). This method creates a new platform for delivery and communication for learning within and without the boundaries of traditional classroom teaching and learning. This method will also allow pedagogues to develop courses and programmes of study, so that institutions can more effectively recruit from wider and more diverse markets. This comes with the added benefit of reducing the developmental time previously associated with the development and maintenance of separate courses for each delivery mode.

Mode Neutral as a method is one that is under research investigation. It is innovative and reinforced by researched models of practice (Constructivism, Scaffolding, 5 stage model), and there are a number of early research findings to date, some of which may raise discussion, debate, and further study. Solid outcomes from research are anticipated to be published June 2008.

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