Significant learning experiences and implied students

David Starr-Glass

Abstract

Purpose – *This paper reflects on and seeks to reconcile and to consolidate two bodies of literature. The first deals with course design in higher education, particularly with efforts to create significant learning experiences. The second body of literature, which is considerably less well-known, considers the implied student – the intended or preconceived student for whom these learning experiences are created. Significant learning experiences are created by instructors for students, not for themselves. Thus, a critical condition for success in course design is to examine and interrogate the implied student that instructors had in mind and to reconcile those preconceived notions with the actual students who populate the learning space.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper is a critical reflection on the literature and the author's experience in designing college level business and economics courses and in attempting to create significant learning experiences in those courses. The study reflects on practice, reviews the relevant literature, and is speculative in nature. It is not empirically based and may well have limited generalizability. However, it is hoped that this paper will promote further exploration of the implied student construct and will lead to further research into the misalignment of expectations and outcomes between implied students and actual students.*

Findings – *The paper contends that there is inevitably a gap – for both the instructor and the learner – between the expectations and outcomes that are anticipated for implied students and realized by actual students. It suggests that recognition of this gap is a critical element in designing significant learning experiences for actual learners. The paper further suggests that success in creating these experiences is improved through reconsidering the implied student stereotype, engaging with actual students and instructor-led communication of the implicit goals and outcomes of the course.*

Originality/value – *Students are best served if they engage in learning spaces thoughtfully centered on significant learning experiences. However, learning environments are often constructed around envisaged students who are defined by the learning expectations, pedagogic philosophies and ideological biases of the instructor. This paper provides value by encouraging instructors to explore their preconceptions of the implied student and creating and facilitating learning environments that recognize, appreciate and respond to the actual students who will populate them. Further, the paper highlights "the implied student," which has gained considerable traction in Nordic countries but only limited attention in the USA and UK.*

Keywords *Course design, Implied learner, Instructor expectations, Learner outcomes, Significant learning experiences*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

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> For a facilitator to completely ignore learners' needs and expressions of preference is arrogant and unrealistic. However, it is just as misguided for a facilitator to completely repress his or her own ideas concerning worthwhile curricula or effective methods and to allow learners complete control over these (Brookfield, 1986, p. 97).

Introduction

Recently, I was invited to read Fink's (2013) *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*. The invitation came from the newly appointed Dean of a college where I teach. As part of an exciting process to reevaluate our institutional impact and teaching effectiveness, the Dean organized a faculty reading circle and assigned this as the first book for group reflection

and discussion. It seemed a particularly creative innovation and I was eager to read the work and to discuss it with colleagues.

Fink's (2013) *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* is an accessible and provocative work that focuses primarily on the dreams and aspirations of college instructors – dreams to create learning experiences that their students will remember as significant, persistent and salient in their present and future. Many instructors find it personally and professionally important to see an enduring validation of their impact on the growth and maturation of students. Many accept that, over time, much of the content and detail of a particular disciplinary study will dissipate into obscurity; nevertheless, they hope that some vital core – a novel cluster of ideas, a different set of perspective or even a few fragments of new knowledge – will persist and have value for students in their futures. This is neither vanity nor hubris. Such an enduring impact might best be considered as a modest token of remembrance that characterizes that successful process of reciprocity and exchange, which we have come to call teaching and learning.

Fink (2013) focuses on realizing the instructional dreams and aspirations of teachers and faculty members. He recognizes that efforts to bring dreams into the realm of reality need a constructive and empowering context – vision and support from the college administration, enthusiasm and reward from the disciplinary department, interest and recognition from faculty colleagues. Among other things, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (Fink, 2013) highlights the experiences of those who have creatively redesigned their teaching environments. It acknowledges instructors who have moved beyond the traditional stagnation of "chalk and talk" lectures to develop engaging and significant learning spaces. These narratives will ring true with those who have reinvigorated and reinvented their teaching in the academy. Yet, one voice that is peculiarly mute, if not totally absent, is the voice of the *learner* for whom these significant experiences are being so energetically created. Yet, even although the narratives of actual students may be absent, it is clear that envisaged or *implied students* are central to the course design endeavor.

This article reflects on the creative impulse to produce significant learning experiences but more expansively it considers the students that we "have in mind" as we move forward with our creations. The first section considers the elements or outcomes, associated with significant learning experiences. These experiences are created by the instructor with the expectation that the learner will find them significant or come to appreciate their significance. Accordingly, the second section explores the anticipated or implied students who were envisaged when the course or learning experience was designed. The final section recognizes that there probably might be – some might say that there inevitably will be – a misalignment between implied students and actual students. This section considers the consequences of misalignment and suggests ways in which misalignment might be reduced or minimized.

The promise and expectation of significant learning experiences

For many faculty members and institutions of higher education, the desire to create significant learning experiences is challenging, perpetual and distinctly realistic. Fink (2013), advocating the critical necessity for *significant learning experiences*, argues that these experiences emerge when our teaching produces:

> [...] something that is truly significant in terms of the students' lives [...] learning that makes a difference in how people live—and the kind of life they are capable of living (p. 7).

Significant learning experiences do not naturally or necessarily flow from teaching, especially if that teaching is understood as instructor-centered and content-dominated. Rather, how and why we teach need to be consciously reevaluated and deliberately restructured to increase the likelihood that significant learning experiences emerge. Usually,

this process leads to the adaptation of pedagogical strategies and approaches centered on the learner, based on active learning and supported by continuous and meaningful feedback.

Fink (2013) observes that the instructor's dream of creating useful and enduring knowledge does not inevitably crystallize into reality. If instructors *really* aspire to produce a memorable learning experience that will have a lasting impact on their students they have to *create* and sustain significant learning experiences in the present. Fink (2013) has developed his own taxonomy of significant learning. In doing so he brings together – and tangentially recognizes – many root concepts, approaches and philosophies that have been previously suggested and developed in Bloom's revised taxonomy of knowledge (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) and in other areas of learning and education – active learning (Bean, 1996; Brookfield and Preskill, 1999); adult learners (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles *et al.*, 1998); experiential learning (Fenwick, 2003; Woods, 2015); and learner-centered teaching (Rancière, 1991; Weimer, 2002).

In developing his taxonomy of significant learning, Fink (2013, p. 280) recognizes six co-present and interlocking learner outcomes that should inform the instructor's design and actions:

1. *Foundational knowledge:* Recognizing key concepts, principles, relationships and facts that constitute significant aspects of the subject matter under consideration;

2. *Application:* Thinking about the subject, develop related skills and apply these to more complex situations;

3. *Integration:* Identifying similarities and interactions among and between other realms of knowledge;

4. *Human dimension:* Discovering the personal and social implications of new knowledge and interacting with it, with oneself and with others in significant and better ways;

5. *Caring:* Changing one's interests, feelings or values related to the subject that is being explored; and

6. *Learning how to learn:* Learning how to inquire, construct new knowledge and become a self-directing learner.

Individually, each of these learning dimensions or outcomes seems eminently reasonable and valuable. Collectively, the elements of this taxonomy suggest moving learners beyond a limited and restricted body of disciplinary knowledge, which might be forgotten and left in the past – and guiding them to reflect on how their learning experiences have changed the ways in which they feel about a more expanded, integrated and social world. Learners need to be supported in appreciating not only subject matter and content but also others and themselves. There is a compelling sense of directionality in terms of change and growth – a sense of direction that may well resonate significantly with instructors, educators and academic institutions.

However, what about the expectations and the anticipated outcomes held by the learners? To what extent do the real learners that we encounter actually anticipate that an introductory course in macroeconomics will lead to becoming a self-directed learner? Do students enroll in principles of accounting course place greater value – or even comparative value – on acquiring foundational knowledge about accounting and on discovering the personal and social implications of such knowledge? And if they do not, could they? And if they could, should they?

Presumably, students beginning these experiences have no or little knowledge of macroeconomics or accounting. They might realistically anticipate that the teaching-learning engagement will allow them to construct new knowledge in these areas. Can we

conclude that just as they enter learning experiences with little knowledge of subject-matter content so too they enter these experiences with little appreciation of education or self-growth? If so, the teaching-learning encounter might be designed to expand their understanding of such areas and to recognize the "higher levels" of Fink's (2013) taxonomy.

There certainly is an implicit assumption in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (Fink, 2013) that this should occur but this assumption hinges on the nature of the *implied students* who are speculated to inhabit our learning spaces. This raises a number of questions:

- How do we, as instructors and educators, come to assemble the construct of the "implied student" who is envisaged in our teaching-learning interactions?

- To what degree do implied students correspond to the actual students that populate our real-world learning spaces?

- To what extent do we, as involved and engaged teachers, impose our framework for action and assessment – guided and reliant on our own pedagogic ideology – in what we claim to be a democratic and authentic "learner-centered" environment?

Implied students: a structural consequence of design

To appreciate how implied students are generated and the degree to which they influence our instructional design, it is important to consider a parallel construction – the *implied reader*. Whalen-Levitt (1983) advocated such a perspective in approaching a literary work or literary genre. Here, the work is understood in terms of what it:

> [. . .] calls upon the reader to know and to do: to know, in terms of experience of both life and literature; to do, in terms of producing a meaning for this particular text, in time, from start to finish (p. 159).

Reimer (2010) pointed out that these implied acts of knowing and doing are "what a text calls upon a reader to enjoy or to value or not to know or not to do" (p. 5). This call is not addressed to readers with a specified identity – race, gender, class or age – but to those who possess a more universal set of "knowledges and decoding skills" because the "reading position defined by such a set is likely to be available to many different human subjects or to be amenable to being learned by them" (p. 5).

Iser (1978) noted that to appreciate the effects and responses produced by literary works it is necessary to "allow for the reader's presence without in any way predetermining his character or his [sic] historical situation" (p. 34). In constructing implied readers, the writer considers that they embody the "predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by empirical outside reality, but by the text itself" (p. 34). The implied reader is a construct of the writer. The implied reader is constructed in and through the work before it has been read. It is neither a pastiche of actual readers nor a projection of those who will engage with the work in the future. It is not that the *actual reader* – as a unique and independent being – is invited into the text; rather, it is the implied reader who is invited to engage with the text, appreciate its structural possibilities and create an emergent product from both text and self.

From this perspective, *sense and meaning* do not reside exclusively in the text (objective meaning) or the reader (subjective meaning). Sense, meaning and ultimately an appreciation or rejection of the work are co-productions. In this joint production, the writer anticipates the text operating as "a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader" (Iser, 1978, p. 9). Thus:

> [. . .] the implied reader as a concept has his [sic] roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader (p. 34).

The implied reader is "better understood as a role actual readers are invited to adopt, but which they can only hope to approximate" (Connors, 2012, p. 34). Actual readers – who are unaware of or unfamiliar with, the structural logic of the text – must rely on their own experiences, constructions and understandings to arrive at interpretations that might make sense to them but which were unintended by the writer (Shi, 2013).

Lars Ulriksen (2009), advancing the notion of the *implied student*, acknowledged that it is analogous with the implied reader. Indeed, he identifies the central bridge between these constructs by exploring Iser's (1974, 1978) work and concluding that the implied student – like the implied reader – "is both a structure of the text because the pre-orientations are situated in the text, and a structure of action because it is a precondition that the reader *does* something – otherwise no meaning will emerge" (Ulriksen, 2009, p. 522 emphases in original). The *implied student* is thus the product of two complementary structures:

1. The *structure of the text*, indicated in the way "the study is designed, in the modes of teaching and assessment, and in the culture [...] expressed through the anticipations and expectations of the teachers regarding what the study is really about."

2. The *structure of action*, which requires and recognizes the student to learn "in a particular way [...] not determining a specific study practice, but [...] [by] a set of frames for what is possible if the practice should still be considered as a legitimate and comprehensible way of engaging with the study" (Ulriksen, 2009, p. 522).

Implied students are neither average nor exceptional. They are undefined by race, gender, class or age. Instead, they are the construction and creation of the instructor, the course designer and the academic institution. Although *actual students* will be encountered, they will be expected to know and act in ways that show they have recognized the implied student in themselves – albeit partially or approximately. Implied students are neither "anchored in an empirical substance" nor in a separate and independent existence: they are "rooted in the structure of the text itself" (Ulriksen, 2009, p. 522).

For instructors creating significant learning experiences, success is a measure of what implied students learn and how they act. For students, their perception of success is measured against what they understand to be the instructor or institutional representation of the implied student. A mismatch between actual student and implied student success can lead to confusion, demotivation or worse. In subsequent work, Ulriksen *et al.* (2015a, 2015b) explored drop-out rates and drop-out behavior among first-year science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students. An emerging theme in these investigations was learner "frustration in deciphering the implied student and fitting into the cultural requirements of the study program" (Ulriksen *et al.*, 2017, p. 52).

Student narratives contained in these studies make it clear that the implied student construct was not limited to "academic practices, interests and attitudes" but to the manner in which it frames and "presupposes particular practices and preferences among the students to be recognized as belonging" (Ulriksen *et al.*, 2017, p. 57). Similar studies in the USA and UK suggest that perceived variation between actual and expected performance is particularly damaging for those learners who are unclear or conflicted about their own expectations and educational values (Hassel and Ridout, 2018; Kandinko and Mawer, 2013).

Thoughtful reconciliation

Implied students arise in the minds of those who design learning experiences. Implied students are neither paragons nor exemplars of excellence. Instead, they are convenient and compliant representations that allow instructors to fit the pieces together and make sense of course-level strategies, dynamics and outcomes. In that respect, implied students are inevitable artifacts of course design. When instructors move from the isolation of this

process into the classroom or lecture theater implied students are replaced by *actual students*. This distinction needs to be recognized and real students need to be recognized. Actual students can be approached as the caricatures of implied students or they can be recognized for who they truly are. It is, perhaps, more useful for the instructor to *thoughtfully reconcile* the nature of the abstractions that populated the course design and the real individuals that sit in the classroom:

■ *Recognize the power and prevalence of implied students:* In so many areas of teaching and education – whether in course design or policy determination – implied student is created, empowered and conserved. They may be abstractions but in their apparent compliance and malleability, they become powerful representations that inform our thinking and actions. The presence and power of the implied student in our considerations and designs need to be appreciated;

■ *Appreciate that implied students speak for us:* Implied students are projections of the values, aspirations and expectations of teachers and educational administrators. They may not be idealized paragons but they are manifestations of what we expect and, perhaps, of what we prefer. At some point in their creation, statistical sampling and demographic analysis might have been considered. However, implied students are not representations of *what is* but rather of what we claim *should be*: they are our own creation and they have neither a separate nor an independent voice – they speak for us, not for others or even for themselves;

■ *Engage with real students:* The challenge for instructors is to engage with the actual students whom they will work with. In that engagement, instructors will not encounter "learners" – they will encounter *people* who are prepared to enter the role of learning. They will be reminded that human beings are complex and that their lives are unique. As an example, the present author has taught online management courses to students who were active members of the US military. They presented themselves as "learners" – and indeed they were interested, motivated and very serious learners. However, as we interacted and sought to establish a relationship, they shared other aspects of their lives that patently impacted their role as learners – individuals stationed in active combat zones, facing the danger of daily patrols and experiencing persistent trauma as comrades were killed in action (Starr-Glass, 2013, 2015);

■ *Share course expectations and anticipations:* When setting out on any learning journey it is useful to decide on the anticipated destination. Of course, the journey can change and bring us to unexpected places but it is usually beneficial for all if the journey is neither chaotic nor serendipitous. The instructor should clarify and clearly communicate the intended destination and the implicit assumptions embedded in the learning experience (Bøe *et al.*, 2018). Periodically, learners should be reminded of the destination and provided with some way of assessing their progress – formative assessment and meaningful feedback. Learning destinations should be negotiated rather than imposed. The instructor should not be reticent to "sell" expectations and sensitize learners to possibilities that they might not have previously considered; however, consensus and agreement is preferable to fiat; and

■ *Distinguish between hierarchies and taxonomies:* Fink (2013) provides a taxonomy of outcomes for the significant learning experience, not a hierarchy. Taxonomies identify, differentiate and classify pieces; hierarchies arrange those pieces in orders, sequences and progressions according to a given or assumed logic. Sometimes, the distinction is unclear or obscured – Bloom's "taxonomy" is actually hierarchical (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Many elements constitute the significant learning experience: "foundational knowledge" might be more dominant in principles of accounting, whereas "caring" might be more evident in macroeconomics. Significant learning experiences should contain and suggest a rich mosaic of Fink's (2013)

elements rather than attempt to assemble those pieces into a contrived pyramid that learners are expected to climb.

It is vital that instructors strive to create and facilitate significant learning experiences. However, in doing so, they should be mindful that there is a difference between significant learning experiences and significant *teaching* experiences – the two might be linked but they need not necessarily be co-joined.

There is also a difference between what instructors and students consider to be significant learning experiences – significant learning experiences are recognized, appreciated and enjoyed by *students*. They may be created by thoughtful and interested instructors, but the final arbitrator as to whether these experiences are truly significant rests with students. Instructors may wish to design learning environments, which are conducive to the emergence of significant experiences. If so, they must exercise care and insight into considering the implied student for whom they created these environments. Equally, they must recognize and appreciate the needs and expectations of the actual learners who come to populate them.

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