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Editorial

Serving up the curriculum…or dishing it out?

When considering curriculum quality in university courses, we can learn a lot from something with which we are all familiar: eating and enjoying a healthy, well presented and balanced meal. Just as we know that a freshly cooked meal using fresh ingredients attractively presented and a with a balance of food types is more enjoyable to eat than reheated left-overs, we know that the curriculum served up to students can result in eager consumption or feel like force-feeding reluctant toddlers. Most people use a knife, fork and spoon, or chopsticks, to feed themselves in a socially acceptable manner. Just as spoon-feeding an adult at the dinner table is usually inappropriate, we must take care not to spoon-feed our students. Cooking a meal 'fit for a king' is a time consuming process. But is preparing and presenting a curriculum to our future professionals any less an important task?

Is the food fresh? Reheating food that has already been thawed and refrozen leads to a potential for food poisoning. Curriculum which is not upgraded with fresh materials from one offering to the next has the potential to become stale and unsavoury. Has it been cooked specifically for us, or has it been made in bulk at a factory, packaged and frozen, ready to be zapped into the microwave and presented to us? Examples of such bulk packaging may be seen in generic 'foundation' courses, which are delivered to students across a wide range of programs. These courses do not address the specific dietary needs or preferences of students. Such mass-produced curriculum, as evidenced by the tendency towards large class sizes at the first-year level in Australia, may need to be rethought as interaction with academic staff, impossible in such large classes is a key predictor of student retention (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010)

Broadening the metaphor a little, digesting learning has some parallels with the way in which we digest food. This is embedded in our language, for example when we 'chew something over'—chewing is designed to breakdown food into smaller pieces, and mix with saliva to start digestion and make the food easier to swallow.

The process of digestion requires the breaking down of complex substances, absorption through the gut wall and reassembly of components to form essential materials for the body to growth and function properly. It is not a difficult task to align this process with the constructivist approach to learning, an active approach where the student needs to assemble knowledge corresponding to their own environments and contexts (Biggs, 1996).

Perhaps fibre, which assists in progression through the gastro-intestinal system, is represented by the challenges we put to students to take some responsibility for their own learning, so they do not develop lazy habits and become constipated.

We all like variety in our meals. Even the most nutritious and balanced meal becomes mundane if it is delivered in the same way every day. Novelty has been shown to be effective in assisting learning (Stupans, Scutter, & Pearce, 2010), just as it can encourage a reluctant child to eat their broccoli. A continuous diet of similar lectures, tutorials and practicals could be as boring as the same meat and three vegetables, served up every evening.

Like a good wine or a well aged cheese, innovative methodology takes time to develop. Incorporating new teaching methods take time to finesse, continually evolve and 'mature'.

And just as food trends change with time, our curriculum must be reviewed and continually improved to keep pace with current industry practices and changing tastes. Much has been said about the so-called 'digital native' student entering university, (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Wood, Barnes, Vivian, Scutter & Stokes-Thompson, 2010). Irrespective of one's perception of the computer skills of students entering university, we need to keep abreast of the changing student body, their preferences learning approaches and expectations.

On a final point, we would be distressed if someone regurgitated the meal we had provided for them. Likewise, we hope that in assessment activities we discover that digestion has occurred and not regurgitation!

Guest editorial by
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