Affordances in Online Course Design

What are Affordances?

In design, an affordance is perceivable clue to the intended function of the object. In education, an affordance is the property of technology that enables new learning opportunities. While some see and use online learning as a venue for merely trying to replicate the face-to-face experience, we must understand that online learning offers users several affordances beyond what can be achieved in a typical lecture hall. By taking advantage of these opportunities, we can use technology to enhance and enable a richer learning experience.

The University of Illinois e-Learning Ecologies MOOC put forth this framework of elearning affordances:

Affordances and Learning Experiences

The important thing to think about is that simply providing technologies, simply putting your course online, into a learning management system, will not revolutionize the way you teach or the success with which students acquire knowledge. We have to design a learning experience first and use technology to enable or enhance.

For example, if you simply record a lecture or series of lectures and arrange them into units alongside online quizzes, have you really changed or enhanced the learning experience from that of the lecture hall? Have you used the affordances that an online platform enables? No, you haven't. Nothing has changed.

This isn't to say that there is no place for well-designed information delivery such as recorded lectures (see the Information Design page for more on that), but you can do so much more than simply replicate the face-to-face classroom. For example:
• You can create scenarios or simulations to help students apply their new knowledge
• You can create spaces for students to learn collaboratively from each other
• You can create interactives to help students better explore certain concepts
• You can enable curiosity by providing resources in various media that explore certain topics in more depth
• You can create opportunities for students who are struggling to try and try again, with immediate and delayed feedback to help concepts finally stick
• You can scaffold concepts using various activities to help students try first with help and then on their own

And these are just a few of the things you can do. As Cope mentions in the clip above, these are not new concepts, but the affordances of technology make these things easier to design and to implement.

Design Affordances

As a part of the learning experience design process, we must also consider those design-aligned affordances we defined earlier. Some of the design affordances might include:

• Are the interactives you design intuitive to use? Does a user intuitively know that this is clickable or something they can interact with?
• Is content accessible in terms of being easy to use and easy to access?
• If I am using lots of videos or other rich media or interactives, will those be difficult for students to access outside of campus?
• How will students be viewing or interacting with the content? Is it able to be used from multiple devices?
• Will students be able to perform tasks within the desired timeline or might it conflict with other important parts of their life (such as a full time job)?

This can seem overwhelming but the truth is that crafting a learning experience, beginning from those ideas about performance goals, users, and user stories make implementing various affordances a natural step in the journey to create an experience that is meaningful, memorable, and motivational.