Educational Research & Innovation Journal
Issued by Education Strategies & Research Center
Ain Shams University

مجلة بحوث التعليم والابتكار
تصدر عن مركز تطوير استراتيجيات وبحوث التعليم
جامعة عين شمس

Designing an Activity-Based Teaching Model for Online and In-Person University Media, Communication, and Culture Programs

تصميم نموذج تدريس قائم على الأنشطة لبرامج الإعلام والاتصال والثقافة الجامعية عبر الإنترنت ووجهاً لوجه

Nehal Ahmed Youssef, PhD[1]

[1] Independent Researcher CDA, Cultural Studies in MCC, ElSherouk City, Cairo Governorate, Egypt

Abstract

The need to modify traditional approaches to teaching theoretical subjects, particularly in the field of Media, Communication, and Culture, is an enduring challenge within higher education. This paper addresses these challenges by proposing a 5-step (Apply the theory approach) activity-based curriculum model. This model aims to enhance the learning experience by emphasising the active application of theory throughout the educational process, rather than relying solely on rote memorisation or passive knowledge absorption. The model strategically integrates online and offline learning approaches, drawing on the work of key figures in educational theory such as Brown and Voltz (2005) and Salmon (2013). It incorporates elements of effective learning, such as active learning methodologies, scenario-based activities to simulate real-world applications, and timely feedback to facilitate student understanding and skill development. These elements are applied across digital and physical learning environments to create a flexible and engaging educational experience. To illustrate the practical application and potential benefits of this model, a detailed case study and sample lecture plans are provided. The proposed model aims to equip graduates with enhanced practical experience and thereby improve their employability prospects within the competitive media, communication, and cultural industries. Ultimately, this activity-based curriculum model offers a promising framework for transforming the teaching of theoretical subjects, potentially bridging the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, particularly within Media, Communication, and Culture studies.

Keywords: Theoretical subjects- Practical application - CDA.

المستخلص:

يمثل تعديل المناهج التقليدية لتدريس المواد النظرية، وخاصةً في مجال الإعلام والاتصال والثقافة، تحدياً مستمراً في التعليم العالي. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية هذه التحديات من خلال اقتراح نموذج منهجي قائم على الأنشطة مكون من 5 خطوات (نهج تطبيق النظرية). يهدف هذا النموذج إلى تعزيز تجربة التعلم من خلال التأكيد على التطبيق النشط للنظرية طوال العملية التعليمية، بدلاً من الاعتماد فقط على الحفظ عن ظهر قلب أو استيعاب المعرفة السلبي. يدمج النموذج بشكل استراتيجي مناهج التعلم في قاعة المحاضرة وعبر الإنترنت، بالاعتماد على أعمال شخصيات بارزة في النظرية التربوية مثل براون وفولتز (2005) وسالمون (2013). ويتضمن عناصر من التعلم الفعال، مثل منهجيات التعلم النشط، والأنشطة القائمة على السيناريو لمحاكاة التطبيقات الواقعية، والتغذية الراجعة في الوقت المناسب لتسهيل فهم الطلاب وتنمية مهاراتهم. يتم تطبيق هذه العناصر عبر بيئات التعلم الرقمية والمادية لخلق تجربة تعليمية مرنة وجذابة. لتوضيح التطبيق العملي والفوائد المحتملة لهذا النموذج، يتم تقديم دراسة حالة مفصلة وخطط محاضرات نموذجية. يهدف النموذج المقترح إلى تزويد الخريجين بخبرة عملية معززة وبالتالي تحسين آفاق توظيفهم في الصناعات الإعلامية والاتصالية والثقافية التنافسية. في النهاية، يقدم هذا النموذج المنهجي القائم على الأنشطة إطارًا واعدًا لتحويل تدريس المواد النظرية، مع إمكانية سد الفجوة المستمرة بين المعرفة النظرية والتطبيق العملي، وخاصةً في دراسات الإعلام والاتصال والثقافة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المواد النظرية، التطبيق العملي، تحليل الخطاب النقدي.

Introduction

The ongoing evolution of higher education necessitates re-evaluating traditional pedagogical approaches, especially for heavily theoretical subjects. Media, Communication, and Culture programs often involve complex theoretical frameworks and require innovative teaching method designs that can effectively translate theory into practice. I argue that the challenge lies in moving beyond merely delivering theoretical content to fostering students' ability to apply these theories in real-world situations. This paper argues for an activity-based curriculum model that integrates theory's application into every learning stage, addressing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Furthermore, it recognises the value of online and offline learning environments and seeks to create a cohesive and flexible educational experience. This expanded perspective acknowledges that while the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of e-learning, traditional face-to-face learning still offers valuable opportunities for interaction and engagement. This paper will explore the theoretical underpinnings of activity-based learning, examine the strengths and weaknesses of online and offline learning, and propose a comprehensive teaching model, including a case study and lecture plans, for Media, Communication, and Culture studies.

1. Traditional Education Theories and the Need for a New Approach

Traditional education theories have often focused on transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the student, emphasising memorisation and recall (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Behaviourism, prominent in the early to mid-20th century, emphasises reinforcement and punishment in shaping student behaviour (Skinner, 1974). While influential in areas like classroom management and skills-based training, behaviourist approaches neglect the cognitive processes involved in learning and portray learners as passive recipients of information. Cognitivism, emerging in response to behaviourism's limitations, focuses on mental processes such as memory, attention, and problem-solving (Anderson, 1983). Cognitive theories acknowledge the importance of the learner's mind in processing information and constructing meaning. However, some cognitive approaches have been criticised for overemphasising individual cognitive processes in decontextualised settings, and for underemphasising the social and contextual aspects of learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

In contrast, constructivism emphasises active learning and the social construction of knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is a social process, with students learning best when actively involved in constructing their own understanding through interaction. He introduced the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), highlighting social interaction and scaffolding in supporting student learning. Piaget (1952) emphasised hands-on experience and discovery learning in developing cognitive structures.

Activity-based learning, aligning with constructivist principles, emphasises hands-on activities, problem-solving, and real-world application of knowledge (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). It recognises that students learn best when actively engaged in learning rather than passively receiving information. This approach is particularly relevant to Media, Communication, and Culture, where students develop theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the ability to apply theory to complex, real-world situations. This paper builds on these constructivist and activity-based approaches to propose a new model for teaching theoretical subjects in Media, Communication, and Culture studies, moving beyond passive information transmission to engage students in the active application of theory in online and offline learning environments.

2. Challenges of Teaching Theoretical Subjects

Teaching theoretical subjects presents perennial challenges. Students often struggle to engage with abstract concepts. They may find it difficult to see the relevance of theory to real-world practice, leading to decreased motivation and a sense of disconnection.

Assessing students' ability to apply theory effectively can also be difficult, as traditional methods like exams and essays often measure recall and comprehension, but may not accurately reflect the ability to use theoretical frameworks in practical contexts.

These challenges are particularly salient in Media, Communication, and Culture. The field encompasses many complex theories, and students need strong analytical and critical thinking skills. They must also apply these skills in various settings, from analysing media texts to developing communication strategies.

Both online and offline learning offer distinct advantages and disadvantages for teaching theoretical subjects. Online learning provides flexibility, diverse technological tools, and personalised pacing (Means et al., 2009; Mayer, 2009; Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005), but may lack face-to-face interaction, potentially causing isolation, and can be hindered by unequal access to technology (Rovai, 2002; Van Dijk, 2020). Offline learning offers direct interaction, immediate feedback, and a structured environment, but has limited flexibility, accessibility issues, and less technological integration.

3. Theoretical Framework: Activity-Based Learning and Constructivism

This paper's proposed curriculum design is grounded in activity-based learning theory and informed by constructivist principles. Activity-based learning emphasises hands-on experience and active participation (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Salmon, 2013). Constructivism posits that students learn best when actively involved in constructing their own knowledge, rather than passively receiving information (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978).

Key tenets of this framework include:

1. Knowledge is constructed, not received: Learners build new knowledge upon their existing knowledge and experiences.
2. Learning is active and experiential: Students learn by doing, interacting, and reflecting.
3. Social interaction is essential: Collaboration and discussion contribute to learning.
4. Learning is context-specific: Knowledge is best learned in relevant and meaningful contexts (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

This framework suggests that effective learning environments, whether online or offline, should provide students with opportunities to engage in meaningful activities, interact with others, and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts.

3.1 Proposed Activity-Based Curriculum Model

This paper proposes a 5-step activity-based curriculum model that integrates online and offline learning strengths to create a dynamic and practical educational experience in Media, Communication, and Culture studies. The core of this model is the "apply the theory" learning approach, which emphasises applying theoretical concepts in practical activities throughout the module.

The five steps of the "apply the theory" approach are:

1. Explaining the Theory: The session begins with a clear and concise explanation of the theoretical concepts.
2. Outlining Procedures and Tools: The instructor outlines the specific procedures, methods, and tools for applying the theory.
3. Applying the Theory: Students engage in activities that require them to apply the theory to real-world examples or scenarios.
4. Feedback and Discussion: Students receive feedback on their application of the theory from the instructor and their peers and engage in a discussion to deepen their understanding.
5. Extension and Reflection: Students extend their learning by applying the theory to new contexts or problems, and reflect on their learning process.

3.2 Technological Tools to Enhance the Model

The following technological tools can enhance the learning experience:

- Learning Management Systems (LMS): Platforms like Moodle, Canvas, and Blackboard organise course materials, facilitate communication, and track student progress.
- Video Conferencing Tools: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet are used for online lectures, discussions, and virtual office hours.
- Collaborative Document Tools: Google Docs, Microsoft 365, and Etherpad facilitate online group projects and collaborative writing.
- Multimedia Creation Tools: Adobe Creative Suite, Audacity, and Blender create and edit multimedia content.
- Interactive Whiteboards: Miro, Mural, and Jamboard support online brainstorming, mind mapping, and problem-solving.
- Online Assessment Tools: Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Google Forms create engaging and interactive quizzes and assessments.
- Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): VR and AR technologies create immersive and interactive learning experiences.
- Social Media Platforms: Platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook create online learning communities and facilitate professional networking.

3.3 Key Features of the Proposed Model Design

1. **Integration of Theory and Practice:** This approach integrates theory and practice, with each session including activities that apply theoretical concepts to enhance understanding (Anderson et al., 2001).
2. **Scenario-Based Activities:** Learning activities use realistic scenarios relevant to Media, Communication, and Culture to provide context and develop problem-solving skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
3. **Collaborative Learning:** The design incorporates group discussions and peer feedback to foster collaboration, communication skills, and community (Vygotsky, 1978).
4. **Formative Assessment and Feedback:** Regular formative assessment with timely feedback helps students identify strengths and weaknesses and improve their learning (Sadler, 1989).
5. **Use of Technology:** Technology creates interactive and engaging learning experiences and equips students with tools for their future careers in Media, Communication, and Culture.

The proposed activity-based model represents a fundamental shift from traditional curriculum designs, emphasising a more active and applied approach to learning.

Feature	Traditional Curriculum Design	Proposed Activity-Based Curriculum Design
Knowledge Application	Primarily at the end of the module (assessment)	Integrated throughout each session
Learning Activities	May be present, but not consistently focused on theory application	Central to the learning process, with a focus on applying theory
Student Role	Passive recipient of information	Active participant in knowledge construction
Assessment	Summative (focused on final outcomes)	Formative and summative (ongoing and final)
Instructor Role	Primarily a knowledge deliverer	Facilitator of learning and guide for application

Table 1: The "apply theory" approach contrasting with traditional methods

3.4 Evaluation Strategy

A comprehensive evaluation strategy will assess the activity-based curriculum model's effectiveness in enabling students to apply theoretical concepts. The evaluation will use mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative measures will include pre- and post-module assessments to measure learning gain, analysis of grades on application-based assignments, and correlation analysis of student engagement and learning outcomes. Qualitative measures will include student feedback, instructor observations, and analysis of student work. The evaluation strategy will be aligned with the module's learning objectives, specifically assessing students' ability to understand and explain theoretical concepts, apply frameworks, develop practical skills, critically evaluate arguments, and communicate effectively. This comprehensive evaluation will provide evidence of the model's effectiveness in enhancing student learning and preparing them for their careers.

4. Case Study: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Module

A case study is presented for a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) module to illustrate the model's application. CDA, a theory and method for analyzing texts (including media), is highly relevant to Media, Communication, and Culture studies because it focuses on the relationship between language, power, and ideology. This module introduces CDA to students, enabling them to apply it in their media analysis and addressing a gap in many existing programs.

CDA is critical in Media, Communication, and Culture studies because it explores how power and ideology are embedded within texts (written words, images, and videos). It examines how language and communication are used to construct and legitimise social inequalities, a central concern in media and cultural studies. By incorporating CDA, students develop critical analytical skills essential for understanding media and communication complexities in contemporary society. This interdisciplinary application of CDA enhances Media, Communication, and Culture curricula and enriches students' understanding of the field and its social impact.

4.1 Module Brief:

This module introduces learners to CDA as a theory and methodological approach for analysing media texts. By the end of the module, learners will be familiar with the key concepts and tools of CDA and be able to apply them provisionally to analyse at least one media text.

4.2 Proposed 5-Step Method "Apply the theory" for the CDA Module:

Step	"Apply the theory" Approach	Learning Activity Goal	Online Tools	Offline Activities	Integrated Activities
1	Introduction to CDA Theory	Students share their initial understanding	Online lecture with multimedia resources (e.g., video lecture with interactive transcript using Kaltura); Asynchronous discussion forum (e.g., using Canvas)	Face-to-face seminar for initial discussion and clarification	
2	Outlining CDA Procedures and Tools	Students write down the main ideas	Online tutorials and interactive exercises (e.g., using H5P); Collaborative annotation of texts using Hypothesis	In-class workshop applying CDA tools to sample texts	Online peer feedback on application exercises (e.g., using Google Docs), followed by in-class discussion
3	The "Theory" in Use	Students analyse a media text	Students analyse media texts independently using online resources and digital tools (e.g., Voyant Tools for text analysis)	Group work in class to analyse a shared media text	Groups present their analyses in class, with online resources used to support presentations (e.g., Prezi or PowerPoint)
4	Feedback and Discussion	Students present analyses and receive feedback	Online feedback from instructor and peers (e.g., using a rubric in the LMS); Asynchronous video feedback using Flipgrid	In-class debate on different CDA interpretations	
5	Extension and Reflection	Outgoing Learning	Students apply CDA to a new media text of their choice and reflect on their analytical process in an online blog (e.g., WordPress)	Students present their extended analysis in a final in-class presentation	Students create a final project that combines online research (e.g., using online databases) and in-class presentation, reflecting on the challenges and insights gained from applying CDA.

Table 1 Proposed 5-Step Method: "Apply the theory" for the CDA Module

4.2.1.1 Lecture Plans: Online and Offline Modes

Two lecture plans, one for online learning and one for offline (classroom) learning, are provided to illustrate the proposed model's implementation further.

A. Lecture Plan 1: Online Mode - Applying CDA to Media Texts

- **Module**: Critical Discourse Analysis
- **Session Title**: Applying CDA: Analysing Media Representations of a Social Issue
- **Learning Objectives**:
  - Students will be able to apply the tools and techniques of CDA to analyse a media text.
  - Students will be able to identify how language is used to construct and represent social issues in the media.
  - Students will be able to evaluate the ideological implications of media representations critically.

Time	Learning Activity	Mode	Tools	Assessment
0:00-0:15	**Introduction (15 mins)**: The instructor introduces the session topic (applying CDA to media representations) and reviews CDA concepts and tools.	Online	Zoom, PowerPoint	Informal assessment: Q&A to gauge students' understanding of CDA concepts.
0:15-0:45	**Group Analysis (30 mins)**: Students analyse a selected media text (e.g., news article, TV advertisement, social media post) in small groups using CDA, focusing on different aspects of analysis (e.g., lexical choices, framing).	Online	Zoom Breakout Rooms, Google Docs/Micros oft Teams for collaborative analysis	Formative assessment: The Instructor observes group discussions and provides feedback on their analysis.
0:45-1:00	**Online Tool Demonstration (15 mins):** The instructor demonstrates how to use an online tool (e.g., Voyant Tools) to aid in the analysis, focusing on identifying patterns in language use.	Online	Zoom, Voyant Tools	
1:00-1:30	**Group Presentations (30 mins):** Each group presents its analysis, highlighting key findings and discussing the media text's ideological implications.	Online	Zoom, Student presentations (PowerPoint/ Prezi)	Formative assessment: Peer feedback on group presentations using a structured feedback form.
1:30-1:45	**Comparative Analysis (15 mins):** The class engages in a comparative discussion, comparing group findings and discussing broader implications for understanding media representations of social issues.	Online	Zoom	
1:45-2:00	**Reflection and Extension (15 mins):** Students reflect on their learning and discuss applying CDA to analyse other media texts. The instructor introduces an extension activity: students conduct a complete CDA analysis of a self-chosen media text related to a social issue, for presentation in the following session.	Online	Zoom, Online blog (e.g., WordPress) for reflection, Online databases for research	Summative assessment: The final project requires students to conduct and present an independent CDA analysis of a media text, evaluated on clarity, critical thinking, and the effective application of CDA theory.

Table 2 Lecture Plan 1: Online Mode - Applying CDA to Media Texts

B. Lecture Plan 2: Offline Mode - Applying CDA to Media Texts

- **Module**: Critical Discourse Analysis
- **Session Title**: Applying CDA: Analysing Media Representations of a Social Issue
- **Learning Objectives**:
  - Students will be able to apply the tools and techniques of CDA to analyse a media text.
  - Students will be able to identify how language is used to construct and represent social issues in the media.
  - Students will be able to evaluate the ideological implications of media representations critically.

Time	Learning Activity	Mode	Tools	Assessment
0:00-0:15	**Introduction (15 mins)**: The instructor introduces the session topic (applying CDA to media representations) and reviews CDA concepts/tools.	Offline	Classroom, Whiteboard, Projector	Informal assessment: Q&A to gauge students' understanding of CDA concepts.
0:15-0:45	**Group Analysis (30 mins)**: Students analyse a media text (e.g., news article, TV ad, social media post) in groups using CDA, focusing on different aspects (e.g., lexical choices, framing).	Offline	Classroom, printed materials, Flip chart	Formative assessment: The Instructor observes group discussions and provides feedback on their analysis.
0:45-1:00	**Class Discussion: Techniques for Analysis (15 mins):** The instructor discusses practical techniques for applying CDA to media texts, drawing on examples from the groups' initial analyses.	Offline	Classroom, Whiteboard	
1:00-1:30	**Group Presentations (30 mins):** Groups present their analysis, highlighting key findings and the text's ideological implications.	Offline	Classroom, Student presentations	Formative assessment: Peer feedback on group presentations using a structured feedback form.
1:30-1:45	**Comparative Analysis (15 mins):** The class compares group findings and discusses broader implications for understanding media representations of social issues.	Offline	Classroom	
1:45-2:00	**Reflection and Extension (15 mins):** Students reflect on learning and discuss applying CDA to other media texts. The instructor introduces an extension activity: students conduct a full CDA analysis of a self-selected media text on a social issue for presentation in the next session.	Offline	Classroom	Summative assessment: Students conduct and present an independent CDA analysis of a media text. This project will assess the clarity, critical thinking, and practical application of CDA theory.

Table 3: Lecture Plan 2: Offline Mode - Applying CDA to Media Texts

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study presents a promising activity-based curriculum model for teaching theoretical subjects in Media, Communication, and Culture studies. However, some limitations should be acknowledged, and future research directions should be suggested. The case study focuses on a single module (CDA), and further research is needed to explore its effectiveness across different modules, subject areas, and disciplines. Contextual factors (e.g., class size, student demographics) may influence the model's implementation and outcomes. The subjectivity of qualitative data and the lack of long-term data are also limitations. Future research should include empirical studies, cross-disciplinary applications, the impact of technology, instructor training, and longitudinal studies. Addressing these limitations and pursuing the suggested avenues for future research can further enhance the understanding and application of activity-based learning in higher education.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the enduring challenge of effectively teaching theoretical subjects, particularly in Media, Communication, and Culture studies, by introducing a 5-step activity-based curriculum model suitable for online and offline learning environments. The model is grounded in constructivist principles and activity-based learning theory, shifting the focus from traditional knowledge transmission to the active application of theory. It integrates online and offline learning's strengths, leveraging technology to create engaging and flexible learning experiences. The "apply the theory" approach, central to the model, emphasises practical application through scenario-based activities, collaborative learning, and formative assessment. A detailed case study, focusing on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) module, demonstrates the model's practical application and its potential to enhance students' analytical and critical thinking skills. Including sample lecture plans further illustrates how the model can be implemented online and offline. Ultimately, this curriculum design aims to foster active learning, collaboration, and critical thinking, better preparing students for success in their academic and professional careers within Media, Communication, and Culture.

References

1. Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports*, 1991(1).
2. Brown, A. R., & Voltz, B. D. (2005). Elements of effective e-learning design. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *6*(1), 1-8.
3. Dabbagh, N., & Bannan-Ritland, B. (2005). *Online learning: Concepts, strategies, and application*. Pearson Education.
4. Ertmer, P. A., & Newby, T. J. (2013). Behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism: Comparing critical features from an instructional design perspective. *Performance improvement quarterly*, *26*(2), 43-66.
5. Laurillard, D. (2012). *Teaching as a design science: Building pedagogical patterns for learning and technology*. Routledge.
6. Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia learning*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Means, B., Bakia, M., & Murphy, R. (2014). *Learning online: The science, politics, and governance of online education*. Routledge.
8. Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakker, K., & Jones, J. (2009). Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies. US Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development.
9. Redmond, J., Abawi, D., Brown, A., & Henderson, R. (2018). An online engagement framework for higher education. *Online Learning*, *22*(1), 183-204.
10. Rovai, A. P. (2002). Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in asynchronous learning networks. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *5*(4), 319-332.
11. Salmon, G. (2013). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. Routledge.
12. Van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2020). *The digital divide*. Polity Press.
13. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.