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Second Teaching Cycle

Blended learning and assessment in lifelong learning

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Background

This teaching cycle was carried out between April and June 2010, when I was teaching the ten week LLL module, Writing Freelance Features. This was an introductory course, which I had initiated and designed back in 1998. Although quite a few revisions have been made over the years, the course outline was still basically the same as the original. It covered the variety of skills needed for writing and selling articles to newspapers and magazines (including research, writing and marketing). Teaching methods involved a combination of classroom discussions, role-play and practical work, and were supported by handouts. Central to the course was the requirement that students will - with support from the tutor - research articles and write features in their own time.

A total of eight students were enrolled. In common with many LLL cohorts, the group represented a wide range of ages, from people in their twenties to those in their sixties. They also came with a variety of educational backgrounds, including those with few formal qualification to others with postgraduate degrees.

Related Scholarship

This teaching cycle focused on two interrelated areas:

- introducing blended learning as part of the module.

- investigating the potential of assessing this blended learning element.

With these two issues in mind, I soon became aware of the need to carry out two distinct areas of research - blended learning and assessment.
**Blended learning**

I began by attempting to 'pin down' definitions of 'blended learning'. Initially, I approached this task with my own 'common sense' definition in mind; believing that blended learning could be simply (or simplistically) described as a combination of e-learning with more traditional forms of teaching. I soon discovered that the term itself can be a problematic one, involving as it does a number of different (and sometimes contradictory) definitions.

As Driscoll states, 'the point is that blended learning means different things to different people, which illustrates its widely untapped potential'.

For the purposes of this teaching cycle, I adopted a conceptually clearer position, informed by descriptions of blended learning as involving a mix between online and face-to-face teaching and learning or 'learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology' (JISC)

As Mohanty argues, blended learning can come with a number of advantages, as it could 'foster greater student responsibility for learning', and 'open new avenues for collaboration [and] community building'. Mohanty also argues that blended learning would have the effect of changing the role of the teacher to that of 'mentor, coach and counsellor'. (2007: 61 - 62).

Peters' observation of distance education (and I was in effect introducing elements of distance education to this course) also struck a chord with me. In particular, in a distance learning context, Peters argues that the role of the teacher is to support and encourage 'the subjectivity, identity and autonomy of adult students - who, after all, are the crucial element in the process' (14).

I was also interested in conducting a 'guided pedagogic conversation', which:

> [M]ust create the atmosphere of a friendly lesson and observe its conventions, inspire the feeling of personal connection between teacher and students, and in this way increase the pleasure and motivation amongst the students.

(Holmerb, B. 1985: 26, quoted in Peters 20)
Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan’s ‘community of enquiry’ framework, which should ‘provide an understanding for the importance of sustained critical discourse and private reflection’ (2007) was also of interest.

Yet, as Russell comments, blended learning also comes with a caveat: the tendency to just introduce it ‘for the sake of it’. He insists that ‘Forcing students to use [blended learning] by only delivering coursework or module notes does little more than allow the user to tick the box’ (2004). Before we introduce blended learning, Russell states, we must first ask ourselves ‘what exactly is the point and what do we want to achieve?’ (Russell 2006)

The question of assessment

I focused here on issues concerned with formative assessment and constructive alignment.

Sadler defines formative assessment as ‘assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning’ (1998: 77). Rather than focusing on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answer, the point of formative assessment is, according to Black and William, to focus on ‘the sequence of two actions’ (my italics):

Firstly, the learner’s perception of the gap between a desired goal and his or her present state (of knowledge and/or understanding and/or skill).

Secondly, the action the learner takes towards closing that gap in order to reach the desired goal.

(Black and William 1998: 8)

As Yorke states, some assessments are designed to be simultaneously formative and summative:

, [They are] formative because the student is expected to learn from […] feedback, and summative because the grade awarded contributes to the overall grade at the end of the study.’ (2003: 480)

Constructive Alignment

Constructive Alignment, which emphasises the need for the teacher to align the planned learning activities with learning outcomes, was central to this activity (and indeed all my teaching activities). This states the need for the curriculum to be
designed so that learning activities and assessment are aligned with learning outcomes.

(Adapted from Biggs 1999: 27)

Constructive Alignment also focuses on encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and so establishing trust between student and teacher. The aim is that the 'real' learning is then managed by the students themselves, with the teacher's role becomes that of creating a supportive and encouraging environment for student to learn.

Planned teaching practice and intended outcomes
My intention was to explore the potential of using the AberLearn Blackboard as a tool which could assist with:
- formative and normative assessment
- facilitating greater depth and breadth of discussions, involving using the Blackboard site for contextualising (i.e. posting cuttings of features which would serve as illustrations of writing techniques and so stimulate discussion, both online and in the class).
- using Blackboard as a tool for posting handouts and additional tutor comments, so students had greater access to course materials (particularly useful for catching up on any missed sessions).

My overarching aim was to address one particular aspect of the assessment criteria: that of assessing students' 'contribution to classroom exercises and discussions', which accounted for 10 per cent of a student's total marks, with the other 90 per cent consisting of assessment of a 1,000 word feature (50 per cent) and a portfolio of written work (30 per cent).

Although this aspect only accounted for 10 per cent of the total, for some time I have viewed this as a problematic part of the assessment criteria. In my experience, this presented a number of barriers to 'objective' assessment:

1. While skills of verbal reasoning and group presentations may be appropriate assessment criteria for many courses, I had doubts that these were the most appropriate assessment criteria for a writing-based course. The key skills of Writing Freelance Features are those of researching, structuring, writing and editing features. Although 'contribution to discussions' only accounted for 10 per cent of the total, I still questioned its effectiveness for assessing student engagement. I also doubted its effectiveness in assessing the application of skills and knowledge covered in the course.

2. I questioned my ability to objectively assess contributions to class discussions during times when I am principally occupied with teaching (and enabling students to engage in deep learning). The task of assessing students' verbal contributions was, in practice, a low priority during the face-to-face teaching sessions. My response to this was to use a 'commonsense' approach of giving the students the 'benefit of the doubt' and erring on the side of generosity. In other words, students (assuming they turned up for most of the sessions) never actually failed this part of the assessment, even if their contribution to discussions was minimal.

3. I felt that while a willingness to engage in discussions could indeed reflect a deep learning on the part of the student, this is by no means necessarily the case. The reflective learner, for example, may need more time to assimilate information (see
Honey and Mumford 2006). As a result, I felt that this assessment method could put some students at an unfair disadvantage.

Despite these reservations, I felt it was important that a proportion of the assessment criteria should be based on collaborative skills. The skillset of journalism in general (and freelance journalism in particular) does involve an ability and willingness to collaborate and network with interviewees, experts, editors and others. Yet today, most day-to-day interaction for the journalist (as it is with many professionals) is dominated by email, social networking, blogging etc. In this context, the validity of using verbal, face-to-face discussion as the sole method of assessing the ability to network, for instance, was becoming increasingly unstable.

My concern was not with the validity of assessing this collaborative element, but with finding more aligned ways of assessing this. Although the course had been updated to adapt to the growth of online media (using internet references, providing a session on writing for the internet etc.), these changes were not yet aligned to assessment. With this in mind, I decided to ‘pilot’ an assessed e-learning element, to see if this could replace - either partially or entirely - that hoary old chestnut of ‘contribution to classroom discussion’.

As discussed earlier, I also wanted to design Constructive Alignment into this e-learning aspect, to ensure that it this activity and the assessment methods used would be aligned to the intended learning outcomes (see Biggs 1999 and 2007). However, I should also stress that for the duration of this teaching cycle, students’ participation in this activity was not assessed in any way.

I also had a number of secondary objectives, which were aligned to, but not directly related to assessment criteria. These were:

- To ease access to course materials

- To facilitate and broaden access to wider resources by providing additional material such as links to useful websites, features etc.

- To encourage greater student involvement and interaction and so enhance the learning experience
- To create the foundations of a community of learning that could continue longer than the ten weeks duration of the course (see Wenger 1998, as discussed in the first teaching cycle).

- To post examples online of (tutor moderated) student work and so encourage peer review and mutual support (and an audience).

The teaching cycle in practice

As mentioned above, my primary aim was to carry out this experiment in order to gain evidence for its future possible use as an assessment method. Should this prove to be a valid method of assessment, I also needed to gauge the proportion of the total assessment mark that would be the most appropriate level at which to set it. For the duration of this experiment, the students’ involvement with Blackboard included blogging comments, initially about Blackboard itself, then about the course in general. Later discussions moved on to specific coursework, including requests for clarification of a specific area of work, apologies in advance for a late submission and messages of thanks for help given. One student posted a request for ideas for calming (the interviewer’s) nerves as well as putting the interviewee at their ease. A fairly long discussion followed, to which three students and I contributed.

Apart from responding to messages and discussions, my contribution largely consisted of postings of handouts, cuttings and examples of students' work (two past and two present).

What worked well

This experiment made a marked improvement to the quality of face-to-face teaching sessions. I now posted handouts on Blackboard and this helped considerably. Some of the time that would have been spend distributing handouts and then talking them through in some detail was now freed up for teaching. As a result, discussions and questions were generally on a higher level, with less time spent on 'talking through the basics' and more on dealing with specific practice-related questions and student-led discussion. There was also more time for more in-depth discussions on more conceptual topics (medla ethics, for instance).
What didn't work so well

Progress was hampered by the significant logistical problems of everyone accessing Blackboard at key stages of the course. With a short course such as this, this turned out to be particularly problematic. Some students were one or more weeks late in getting on the site, while one never made it there. As a result, I always needed to have the 'back ups' of sending handouts and other information as e-mail attachments and having to still rely (although to a far lesser extent) on paper handouts.

One student described the process of getting on and finding her way around Blackboard as 'Byzantine'. (These problems were not helped by the fact that as with skills of LLL students in general, there were significant variations of the level of IT skills and familiarity with the Internet among the students). I should also own up and accept my share of the responsibility. Before this cycle began, I had had no previous experience of using Blackboard and so the students were not the only ones finding their way around the system for the first time. This lack of experience on my part did not help the situation. During the early postings, for example, I missed some of the students' comments through not looking in the right places. These 'teething problems' may have impacted on later use, as the number of comments by students dropped. Although this could have been explained by the fact that they were now more preoccupied with completing their final assessed project.

During the fifth week (and two weeks after I had given students their instructions for accessing and using Blackboard), I delivered a one-to-one hands-on session with three students respectively, none of whom had accessed Blackboard at that point. Following this session, two of the three were able to access and use the site. The third was unable to do so, due to apparent registration problems. On reflection, in the future I would use the time saved on teaching to deliver these hands-on sessions as an integral part of the course, during weeks two and three. If this cycle has taught me nothing else, it has taught me that when using IT as part of a course, I need to provide more hands-on IT support to students. My reasons for not having done this at the outset were:

- anxiety about taking time out of teaching 'core' skills
- an overreliance on the AU Blackboard help team. Although I personally found this service helpful, some students seem reluctant to use it and appear to benefit more from face-to-face support.

**Feedback on the learning experience**

Feedback was conducted informally during a class discussion in the ninth (i.e., the penultimate) lesson. Six students were present, five of whom were now using Blackboard as part of the course. The other student had, for various technical reasons, not managed to get onto Blackboard.

Student feedback was somewhat limited by the fact that only six of the eight students managed to get onto Blackboard at all. And of the six, two finally accessed it weeks later than planned. Following some initial resistance: 'I don't think this is very useful' etc., four of the five students interviewed who were using Blackboard, said that they found it helpful. All said that they would value hands-on training on how to use Blackboard as part of the face-to-face teaching sessions.

In the event, no students posted their work voluntarily, although I posted (with their permission) two mediated pieces of current students’ work as models of good practice. All students stated that it they would not find it helpful to post work in progress, or even completed work that has not yet been assessed. One student commented that this 'would make her feel exposed'.

Of the six students who had accessed Blackboard:

- all found it useful for handouts
- all found it useful for accessing my postings of press cuttings etc.
- four said they found the online discussions helpful
- most felt that as it stands, they would not like to have been assessed on their contributions on Blackboard.

- However, when asked that if, in an 'ideal world' situation, where they had all got onto and use Blackboard immediately and where technical problems did not present
a barrier, would they have felt some form of assessment to be fair, all agreed that (technical problems aside) this could be a useful assessment method.

**Evaluation of the student learning experience - and future plans**

One thing that has become clear is that if LLL students are to use Blackboard and other methods of blended learning effectively, many will need hands-on training. As Hofman observes, it’s important to include a formal session to introduce the learner to blended learning and to give hands-on guidance on how to use the technology [Hofmann 2001]. While this hand-on session should ideally be provided by in-house specialist staff (the e-learning support officer, for instance) I suspect that resources will not allow for this and that responsibility will fall upon the shoulders of the tutor. Yet in many cases (and this definitely applies to me) the tutor is not the best person best qualified to deliver this.

Posting handouts online appears to work well (with those students who can access them). Yet I suspect that handouts sent as e-mail attachments - and good old fashioned printed versions too - will be used as back-ups for some time to come. As for my part, I need to give more specific and clear instructions on what exactly students are supposed to do with handouts and other materials posted on Blackboard, as well as what is expected of them in terms of e-learning engagement (reading postings and contributing to discussions etc.)

Despite these reservations, I do intend to include an assessed element of blended learning as part of this course in the future. This would require me to be transparent and clear from the outset about how I will be assessing. I would also need to offer face-to-face support, especially during the first two weeks, to help students access and navigate Blackboard. I would also clearly signal when an exercise is being assessed (e.g. when I post a feature for which I would expect responses). I would also need to use e-mail as a backup in the event of a student failing to access Blackboard within the first three weeks of the course.
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