

17: 'I didn't know this was possible' reflections on a variety of Web 2.0, classroom-based and online technologies

Name and role

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Background

This case study reports on the Engaging and Enhancing Student Learning (EESL) module which forms the core module of the newly accredited Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) blended Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) offered by the Academic Development Unit (ADU) at the University of Salford. The successful completion of the PGCAP Programme leads to a teaching qualification in Higher Education (HE) and Fellowship of the HEA.

The blended PGCAP, is a multi-disciplinary programme, which replaced the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice and Research and was offered in Semester 1 of 2010/11 to new in-service academics and other professionals who support learning at the University of Salford. A number of participants have some or more extensive teaching and/or training experience in HE or other sectors.

The case study presented here, refers to lessons learned from the first cohort completing the EESL module with a focus on how technology has been used to enhance and extend engagement, learning and teaching.

The EESL module itself aims to introduce participants to learning and teaching in HE, and is aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF). It is delivered over 13 weeks and consists of an online two-week pre-induction, nine face-to-face workshops and two online weekly seminars.

Please note: Academics and other professionals who join the PGCAP Programme are referred in this case study as participants.

Intended outcome(s)

Within the EESL module, active, collaborative and connected and technology-enhanced learning and teaching approaches are used and modelled, blending face-to-face and online and enabling the formation of an extended, flexible learning community learning with and from each other.

By the end of the EESL module, participants will have had the opportunity to :

1. Identify the importance of technology-enhanced learning and teaching approaches in the

- HE context.
2. Experience and evaluate a variety of technology-enhanced approaches for learning, reflection, teaching and assessment.
 3. Discuss how technology-enhanced approaches can be used in their own practice.

Established practice

A variety of Web 2.0, classroom-based and online technologies were used in combination with the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard) and the web-conferencing tool Elluminate for tutorials and webinars to enable collaborative and connected learning, and to model flexible technology-enhanced learning and teaching approaches.

In total, there are three fully-online learning periods within the EESL module:

- *Pre-induction (2 weeks)*: Familiarisation with the PGCAP Programme, the EESL module, the Online Programme Space as well as peers and tutors through online asynchronous discussions and a set of activities and resources made available.
- *Week 2 (1 week) asynchronous weekly seminar*: Tutor-led online discussion around the weekly theme with the focus on learning theories.
- *Week 8 (1 week) asynchronous weekly seminar with evening webinar*: In addition to the expectation to engage in the asynchronous discussion during the week, a webinar is arranged with an expert to get the cohort together online and to discuss the weekly theme which is Quality Assurance and Enhancement in HE.

There are a number of opportunities to interact online and access resources in a variety of media, including audio, video and complete interactive quizzes on a weekly basis, which are released in 1-2 days in advance of the start of the week.

PebblePad, the eportfolio system, is used for learning, reflections, but also to store and share assessment tasks with tutors and peers, as well as connect with each other and engage in peer learning.

For two-way announcements and out-of-class communication between the module team and the participants, Twitter and Blackboard were used. The Twitter feed was embedded within the online programme space in Blackboard.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

ADU's activities are in line with the University's strategic goals and its Learning, Teaching & Enhancement Strategy 2009-15. The ADU works collaboratively with academics and other professionals who support learning across the University to raise the standards and quality of teaching and to use technologies effectively to enhance the student experience.

Throughout the EESL module, participants were invited to experiment in a safe environment and within a learning community with ideas and concepts, to develop reflective skills and challenge their own beliefs linked to learning and teaching in HE, i.e. to begin shaping their teaching philosophy and academic identity while exploring technologies which have the potential to enhance and transform their practice.

Our findings confirm, that giving academics the opportunity to experience first-hand technology-enhanced approaches as students, helps them to understand better the benefits and challenges, to be more pro-active in experimenting with some of these technologies and to start developing technology-enhanced learning and teaching strategies to be used with their own students.

Key points for effective practice

With trainee teachers, as would be the case in nursing and other professions, often the subject matter under discussion is potentially vulnerable individuals, in this case children. A great deal of prior thought went into creating rigorous safeguarding protocols relating to digital capture, storing and sharing of any classroom based materials.

At the outset I challenged everyone to use at least two digital media on each page of their e-portfolio; for example, text, video, graphics, animation and/or audio. At first many students were very apprehensive, a few resistant, but the outcomes have been fantastic with many students feeding back how proud they are of their new communication tools and how useful these are going to be in engaging young learners in the 21st century primary classroom.

Success

Overall, the module team and participants felt that the approaches used during the EESL module were effective. They enabled the module team as well as the participants to experiment with, and immerse themselves in, a variety of high-, low- and no-tech learning and teaching situations and explore more creative learning and teaching approaches that had an impact on participants, their beliefs and attitudes, practice and stimulated change.

Participants commented positively on:

- The wide range of teaching methods used, including online delivery.
- The active and collaborative learning approach used in the portfolio-based assessment and the ongoing opportunity to receive formative written and audio feedback on drafts. For example, "Thanks for the feedback which I have just listened to which was very useful. Audio certainly does add another dimension and richness to the dialogue and I can see why you have been keen to get people to try it out. I'll look to include a note/recording on the development points you suggested in my portfolio." (cohort 1 participant 4)
- The opportunity participants had to submit their work in media-rich formats, beyond text; some experimented with audio.
- The innovative way Blackboard was used: "Many of the ways you have used Blackboard I did not know were possible." (cohort 1 participant 4).
- The variety of the media-rich resources provided within Blackboard.
- The flexible and varied support participants received throughout the module.
- The variety of physical and online learning spaces utilised: "*The webinar helped me see how Elluminate can be used more interactively. I have used it in the past but it has always been very one way to me.*" (cohort 1 participant 3).

The challenge

Some participants were less familiar with using technology-enhanced approaches for learning and in their own practice. This reality presented a challenge for the module team and the participants themselves.

Issues identified during the EESL module:

- According to participants, the first online weekly seminar was offered too early, in week 2, when participants didn't know each other well enough.
- Some participants found it difficult to study the learning theories online without a face-to-face discussion. "It would have been useful to have a quick talk on each main learning theory (say 5 minutes each) in a lecture, just to get the main idea of each theory." (cohort 1 participant 1).
- Some found it challenging to follow and participate in the online discussions in Blackboard.
- A number of participants found the PebblePad eportfolio system frustrating. "A few of us are finding PebblePad a time-consuming software to learn that's not accessible to all" (cohort 1

participant 2). It hindered them from using it on a regular basis, contributing drafts and artefacts in media-rich format (the vast majority of work submitted was text-based followed by audio). A number of participants uploaded the majority of assessed tasks on or shortly before the deadline.

- Some found the Online Programme Space in Blackboard difficult to navigate.

The following changes have been implemented and the module guide has been updated for cohort 2, responding to the feedback received by the participants, the module team's own evaluation and in discussion with the PGCAP Programme Leader:

- An eportfolio familiarisation session is now being offered before induction.
- An alternative Web2.0 technology, Wordpress, is currently being trialled in combination with PebblePad for portfolio building to explore if it enables participants to use it more effectively and creatively and engage with it during their studies on the module and beyond. A comparative study will measure the effectiveness of both implementations after cohort 2 complete the EESL module. The first online weekly seminar has been moved to week 4.
- Weekly online reading tasks have been introduced followed by asynchronous discussions using Web2.0 technologies to enable further and regular engagement with the literature on learning theories as well as the opportunity to connect with peers and tutors outside the classroom and to learn collaboratively.

Blackboard discussions are now used in combination with Web2.0 technologies that enable interaction in a variety of ways. The following were for example introduced for cohort2: Voicethread (www.voicethread.com), Mindmaps (www.mind42.com), Noticeboard (www.wallwisher.com), Instant Chatroom (<http://todaysmeet.com/>).

Key points for effective practice

Technologies can enable, enhance and extend learning opportunities if utilised effectively and based on a sound pedagogical rationale.

It was the first time this type of programme was offered in blended mode at the University of Salford. A lot of preparation and planning has gone into the EESL module aiming to apply and model online alongside face-to-face pedagogies and utilising learning spaces that would enable active and collaborative learning within and beyond the classroom.

Technologies used in the EESL module were part of the fabric of learning and special attention was paid during the planning stage of this module to exploring ways to model the effective use of these to participants. Institutional digital tools were therefore used alongside Web2.0 technologies continuously and throughout the EESL module in a variety of ways and had a positive effect and impact. Participants confirmed that they found this approach useful for their own learning and evidence shows that it has led some to use some of these technologies in their own practice.

It was noted that there was some resistance in using some of the technologies during this module and others found it challenging to engage online and use the PebblePad eportfolio system to capture their learning journey and assessment tasks.

Offering flexible support and guidance alongside self-study materials was of high importance. It both enabled and maximised engagement with the EESL module and increased confidence in using these technologies for learning.

The EESL module team carries out ongoing evaluations to re-adjust, re-structure content, delivery and assessment of this module for future cohorts and is actively seeking feedback from participants which is taken into account during the evaluation stage together with their own

observations and reflections.

Main lessons learned were:

- Pedagogical rationale is necessary.
- Technologies have the potential to enhance learning and teaching.
- Planning is vital.
- Taking risks and experimenting pays off.
- Be responsive, re-active and proactive.
- Be flexible and prepared to make changes on an ongoing basis.
- Portfolio-based learning creates additional opportunities for dialogue around learning between tutor and students and among students.
- Actively engage students in the design, delivery and evaluation of technology-enhanced initiatives.
- Offer ongoing flexible support and guidance.

Conclusions and recommendations

Within academic development, and teacher education in general, it is important to model good practice and provide the space to participants to experiment with a variety of methods, approaches and technologies, encourage thinking outside the box in order for participants to become more adventurous in their own practice.

In order to maximise face-to-face and online engagement, the order of some of the sessions was changed responding to participants' feedback and the module team's observations.

Overall, the blended nature of the module worked really well and provided additional flexibility and opportunities to engage and collaborate face-to-face and online through a variety of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities. One action that is a direct response to participants' feedback is the introduction of weekly reading activities to maximise engagement with the literature. These are now used in cohort 2 and have been combined with online collaborative activities.

Also, the portfolio-based assessment strategy - despite the difficulties the tool itself presented for some- proved to be an effective way to engage some participants in ongoing formative feedback conversations to deepen learning. The module team is currently exploring alternative tools that could be used for portfolio-building in response to the frustration some participants expressed with PebblePad and, through monitoring of the use of the portfolio system, a new system is now being trialled with the current cohort alongside to explore if a different tool has the potential to maximise portfolio-based learning.

The approaches used within this module and the recent changes implemented are transferable to similar modules and programmes within academic development and teacher education. The lessons learnt, might also be useful for blended postgraduate modules in other professional areas and disciplines.

Additional information:

If you would like to find out more about any aspect of the EESL module or the PGCAP programme at the University of Salford, please access <http://www.adu.salford.ac.uk/html/pgcert/intro.html> or contact Chrissi Nerantzi at c.nerantzi@salford.ac.uk