

6: Blended Learning tools to support Collaborative Learning

Name and role

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Background

Nottingham Trent University School of Education has been involved in initial teacher education for over 50 years. It provides a range of courses designed to facilitate entry into the teaching profession in both primary and secondary phases. Secondary routes include Undergraduate BSc and BA (Hons) routes and Postgraduate and Professional Certificates in Education.

This case study describes how blended Learning tools have been used to support collaborative learning during the first term, of the first year undergraduate BSc (Hons) Secondary Design and Technology Education programme.

Students on the programme are a diverse group, with students who are mature alongside school leavers. The taught programme is delivered at the city campus, using specialist workshops facilities and simulated teaching classrooms. Some students live within the city boundary; however mature students often commute from across the Midlands, some travelling over 30 miles in to Nottingham.

The activities discussed in this case study used a blended approach to learning, involving face to face sessions at the city campus and on-line sessions via a 'wiki'.

Intended outcome(s)

The blended learning tools were chosen to support the development of collaborative skills and transition into HE learning during the first term of an undergraduate programme. The objectives were to:

- Create an area for the students to meet and chat before the course start date; and
- Allow for students to develop their collaborative skills through using blended learning.

The challenge (including established practice)

First year students at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) cite "the need to establish new friendship groups and cope with the expectations of a new culture and ways of learning" (CASQ, 2009) as high priorities for their move into higher education (HE). As tutors, this is something that we wanted to address. Leese (2011) and Lowe and Cook (2003) have argued that the anxiety

and pressure caused by this transition can be abridged through an induction programme which scaffolds the process.

In September 2009 we had used blended learning to support the process of induction with new, undergraduate and post graduate, design and technology education students. These blended learning strategies were believed to be successful, as they enabled the creation of social networks for the students and allowed tutors to develop insight into the values and interests of their students, prior to the start of teaching (Laurillard 2002). However the strategies didn't support "ways of learning" in HE so we wanted to explore this further.

Two issues arose from this use of blended learning:

- Only 50% joined the wiki
- Students did not use the wiki to work collaboratively

Established practice

In September 2009 blended learning tools were used and all first year students were invited to join a closed pre-induction wiki, two weeks before the start of the programme. Over 50% of the students accessed the wiki and when asked for feedback, they valued the ability to socialise online before meeting the other students on their programme. Tutors saw the benefit of using the wiki and wanted to develop its use by providing purposeful activities through providing a range of activities on the wiki and modelling the benefit and modelling how to use the wiki.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

The advantage of using the blended learning approach was:

- The wiki was quick and easy to set up for tutor;
- Tutors able to gain insight into new students before they started;
- Students could join before enrolling at the university (the university VLE could only be used by students once they had enrolled);
- Students could meet each other and the tutors online before the start of the course;
- Tutors were able to introduce social learning on a task that would normally have been completed individually.

Key points for effective practice

- Record home email addresses at interview and check if they are correct so that invites to the wiki could be sent out
- Allow time for tutors to write on the wiki about themselves, adding a picture – modelling what you want the students to do
- Start the wiki one month before enrolment (any shorter and they may be moving and have problems with internet access)
- Reinforce the use of the wiki with tasks early in the induction week
- Encourage students to respond to each others questions

Conclusions and recommendations

The wiki was an effective stepping stones into HE. With the growing number of diverse learners it was important for them to meet each other before the course and find others who had come from similar education backgrounds to themselves. However, the amount of online collaboration that took place was not as much as the tutors had anticipated; this was partly due to the limited e-moderation and the presentation of the activities on the wiki.

Students also completed a group design project later in the year where they set up their own wikis to collaborate online.

Additional information:

Wiki website: www.pbworks.com

References:

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