7: <u>Click here</u>: navigating the teaching qualification in Further Education - online distance learners around their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

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Background

The Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQ (FE)) at the University of Dundee is a distance learning, in-service, teaching qualification. Learners attend the university for one workshop per module but otherwise work at a distance. The programme is delivered online via 'My Dundee', the University's virtual learning environment which uses Blackboard software. The programme is delivered in partnership with the learners' employers who are, in the main, colleges in Scotland, and is available at postgraduate level 11 and undergraduate level 9 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

Intended outcome(s)

- To increase engagement with the course Virtual Learning Environment VLE for all participants.
- To increase learner confidence and self-direction/learner autonomy
- To require learner contact with, and use of, all relevant learning materials and resources before starting assessments.
- To increase opportunities for learners to interact with other learners and with the tutor team through provision of an online platform for peer assessment through small group Journals.
- We also wished to embed further styles of delivery to accommodate the learning preferences of our learners and to engage increased numbers in online discussion and feedback. It was hoped that by experiencing the benefits of this interaction, they could then consider implementing it with their own learners.
- We decided to design and create an initial guiding Pathway through the VLE which would navigate the participants through the different areas which they would need to access to successfully work through the programme. Using web-pages, the Pathway would link areas of the VLE together, initially via 'click here' links when participants were new to the VLE, and then through simple navigation instructions, facilitating them to learn the location and route for themselves.
- Pathways were one of a series of strategies aimed at decreasing one-to-one learner to tutor email traffic asking and answering questions about VLE navigation.

The challenge
Tutors' previous initial expectations, found from one mandatory workshop, were unrealistic for some learners it was too much to take on at once. The familiarity of the programme VLE to tutor team led to presumptions about learner confidence and accessibility. Learner feedback included:

> *"Didn't seem to be a clear path through any of it."*

> *"…it took quite a bit of getting used to which may have put some people off using it"*

> *"At first I found it very difficult to find things, though now I have used it, it is much easier"*

Saliency of online activities is essential due to lack of learner time (learners are lecturers) and, in line with adult learning theory, they need to be aware as to why they need to do them, as discussed in Knowles (1980).

In September 2009 the new version of the software hosting the programme VLE caused technical navigation problems e.g. loss of the left hand menu.

In learners' end of programme evaluations some had clearly not accessed support materials and resources on the VLE. For example:

> *Learner (L): I haven't got that on my VLE*
> *Tutor (T): It's in the left hand menu, in a folder ….*
> *L: I haven't got that on my VLE*
> *T: Are you online now? Go to the left hand menu- see that folder called…?*
> *L: Hang on…oh yes. I've not been in that folder before - shall I click on it?*

Evaluation of the programme by previous TQ(FE) cohorts identified that we did not accommodate a sufficiently broad number of learning styles. The challenge was to design a Pathway that would show learners who preferred hands on activities where these were and oblige them to use them as part of the Pathway activities.

Online Journal use has allowed for more opportunity for learners to interact appealing to those who work in isolation as well as providing peer support. Previous feedback included:

> *"…the distance and occasional lack of contact can be frustrating. Its good to talk you know."*

> *"I would have preferred more interaction with tutors and other students"*

> *"Lack of physical interactive presence. Insufficient interaction fostered between learners. Consider learner pairing or grouping and combine with some group activity…"*

Established practice
Initially learners attended a mandatory induction workshop which included a hands-on VLE session which included activities designed to encourage them to access all areas of the VLE. Then, at a distance and at their own pace, learners worked though online learning units and undertook formative assessments (with deadlines), backed up by a range of support resources, both at the programme and university level. Formative feedback was given before summative submission. A programme blog did not engage the majority of the learners and lack of responses frustrated those who did use it. This has been changed for this academic year and is now a key aspect of programme communications, having been incorporated into the Pathway activities.

Screencast of the <u>Pathway Activities <http://screencast.com/t/O93QmQ71hUzE></u>

After the induction workshop some felt a kind of panic eg how to get started. Comments from learners included:

> *"…navigation is an issue…not very clear where to start"*

> *"I found myself having to learn the VLE before I could use it."*

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage
Following on from the Induction Workshop, learners follow the Pathway which works as the name suggests initially taking learners to all areas of the VLE they need to use via hyperlinks, backed up by instructions of how to find things themselves and then engaging them in activities that are aligned to the programme learning outcomes. Then, as the programme continues, learners' knowledge of what is where enables them to successfully access the complete set of materials and carry out assessments, informed by their experiences, subject and educational philosophies as discussed by Green *et al* (2005) cited in Loughlin and Lee (2010).

The use of the Journal tool in small groups has allowed learners, who are located in a wide geographical spread across Scotland and further afield, to interact with the university team and with their fellow learners.

Examples of the peer feedback from a reflective writing Journal activity this year include:

> *"On reflection, it is clear that if I'd adopted these and Johns' (2000) model for structured reflection I might have been more successful."*

> *"Organised and deliberate time for reflection seems to be key to our success. Thank you for taking the time and sharing your experience."*

Their participation may take place wherever they have access to the internet and whenever they choose. This could help the profession as a whole as it allows for further networking across Scotland and beyond.

Learners have also benefited from peer assessment and feedback, helping them to develop their own critical skills and metacognition. For example:

> *"You certainly did reflect on all this very well. It was interesting as I could see you reflecting on your feet, 'In Action' (Schön), and this class would have found the lesson much more annoying if the 3 students had remained unchecked and you had continued on with your lesson as planned. I think although you could have been more prepared for this class, this is not always possible."*

Key points for effective practice
- Setting up of three Pathways with our School's Learning Technologist whose involvement was key to success in terms of both design and function.
- Creation and design of each step's content and careful control of amount of information and length of task.
- Design and accessibility of the Pathways, steps and instructions for easy following and yet leading to learner autonomy and self direction.

- Careful creation of small Journal groups of 5-6 learners, balancing gender, college location, subject area and avoiding duplication of learner names, so that first names could be used and any 'cliques' avoided.
- Speed of access to Journal can affect accessibility at busy periods and lead to lack of learner motivation.
- Any changes made during the programme e.g. to assessment procedures means changes to web pages which requires on-going expertise of learning technologist.

Conclusions and recommendations

Results of our evaluation show 64.7% of programme participants (September 2010 intakes) contributed to their Journal groups. This breaks down to: 62.9% of postgraduate (PG) and 66.6% undergraduate (UG) participants.

There was a different level of engagement between those who started the programme with some Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) credit: Credit Top Up (UG and PG) 83.3% and those who are undertaking the full two module programme: Standard route (UG and PG) 54.5%.

18.2% of participants who only undertook Module 2 (11 UG and PG) engaged with the Journal.

Feedback on the Pathways is still to come via end of module surveys, including statistics on engagement with the Pathways. Positive feedback has been given anecdotally at the programme board and from individuals and college mentors in informal feedback.

There was a greater number of formative assessments submitted than in previous years with markers noticing a correlation between non-engagement in a Pathway or an activity in the Journal and poor or absent submission of first formative assessment.

Speed of access to Journal by learners and tutors was compromised at times when internet use was high.

Allow for plenty of preparation time, setting up groups, welcome postings, and lists for monitoring learner engagement. Consider training needs for tutor team and sharing out of the necessary tutor interaction with Journal as it's very time consuming.

Aid peer assessment through provision of a criteria checklist so learners know what to look for (Sadler, 2009, Sadler, 2010) and to help remove perceived 'risk' of being critical, which hindered some from giving peer feedback.

Some Journal groups were inactive - strategies to encourage participation worked with some. Again a checklist will help criticality.

Additional information

Video showing the Pathway's steps: http://screencast.com/t/O93QmQ71hUzE

Formal evaluation of the Pathways and Journals will inform how these will be used to enhance next session's planning of this programme.

References

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