

Pedagogic issues in designing a module to include online assessment: a case study

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Context

This case study concerns 'Travel and Society', an advanced level module offered to students taking the Travel Management pathway at London Metropolitan University's North Campus. It has been designed to introduce travel management students to the broad context of personal mobility. This module is unique, as for the first time it offers undergraduate students taking this pathway the opportunity to utilise web based assessment. At an employer's forum, the concept was praised by the employers present as a suitable and innovative way of assessing learning within the context of developing the student for the workplace.

Travel management students address the wider issues of travel in society at a local/regional, national and global level. Within this framework the student is encouraged to focus on travel and society issues in a country of their choice. Critical reflection on a range of contemporary issues is integral to the course, from social equity in personal mobility through to the impact of travel on the environment to the development of new technologies. A sharp analytical focus is expected and is developed through the interpretation and analysis of transport, travel and tourism statistics. Students attend a mixture of taught classes, tutor-supported information technology [IT] workshops and booked IT workshops, and are exposed to a range of group and individual online tasks. Eleven students took the 'Travel and Society' module in semester B 2002, as the first cohort.

WebCT was selected as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) within which to deliver the module. VLEs are designed to act as a focus for students learning activities and their management and facilitation (Stiles 2000). It offered both synchronous and asynchronous interactive facilities for students and tutors. It further offered the facility for placing and archiving the student work.

Rationale and aims of the innovation

To reflect the diverse range of materials available for students to draw upon – for example, music, video, current affairs programmes, newspapers, food, artefacts - it was decided that multimedia presentations on the web would provide the student with the maximum flexibility to build in the 'feel' of the country they are researching. Students were therefore required to undertake a group task (bibliographic review) online and also had the option of designing a webpage to incorporate various aspects of their research.

The focus on the assessment process was crucial. For teachers, the curriculum is seen as the centre of our teaching, but students may think otherwise. 'From our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum' (Ramsden, 1992). Students learn what they think they will be tested on. In a poorly aligned system, this results in inappropriate surface learning, the "backwash" effect identified by Biggs (1999).

However, if the teaching activities of the teacher and the learning activities of the learner are both directed to the same goal, assessment has to be well received - as well as 'useful and formative, it is important that effective, and prompt, feedback is given' (Ramsden, 1992). The advantage of early assessment in the module, especially with using the bulletin board section of WebCT, was that the group evaluations of material could be made public to all other learners. In addition, the tutors' feedback on the task, in terms of the quality and quantity and suitability of the materials researched, provided rich formative feedback within the summative assessment setting. This approach was adapted from the work of Miller *et al* (1998) where 'prompt feedback is particularly useful in that it can help to guide students as to the tutors' expectations at an early stage'.

Discussion of the innovation

The main innovation in the module was the group-based literature review, presented on WebCT. Therefore the first assessment will be discussed and evaluated in detail.

Assessment One:

Students in small groups will research a topic and post a 500-word summary of the results of their work with useful websites/ books/ articles/ journals/sources of information onto the group area of the WebCT site. This activity will take place in weeks two, three and four. It is envisaged that the information posted by the groups will provide a resource bank of information for all the students to draw upon, as they start to work on their individual coursework. (Course handbook 2002)

The two tutors in the first week assisted students to set up their accounts, and to log on and chat synchronously in real time. The students liked the idea of forming self-selecting groups in the IT studio, where they could both use

technology and 'see' the real person. The following week, when the groups had been created by the students themselves, a more formal "teaching" task was offered, whereby the students were expected to examine a series of websites and evaluate their authenticity according to a check list supplied by the tutors. The students then posted their group literature review results weekly to dates agreed by the whole student group.

The evaluation of online assessment task one may be summarised as follows:

Use of informal then formal teaching in the studio:

Nine of 11 students liked the use of "informal" chat in the first couple of weeks to get to know each other and develop confidence with using WebCT.

How did students find the group work experience working online?

While the majority (7 students) thought the experience was the same as face-to-face, 3 found it easier online and 1 found it more difficult.

What skills did the students develop working online during the first task?

Most (9 students) were of the opinion that group work as well as IT skills had been developed; the other 2 thought online skills only.

Could students quantify their "before" and "after" skill development?

Most students believed their online skills had improved by a high factor of 2 on the scale of 1-7 (where 7 was the lowest rating).

Did the groupwork task make the individual report easier?

The majority of students (7) agreed that this was so, three felt it made no difference, and one student that it had made doing the report more difficult.

Overall, in the perception of most students, working in small groups in online mode had constructively aided their engagement with assessment tasks, enhanced their teamwork skills and significantly boosted their IT skills.

The second stage of assessment was a more traditional offering, where a report was to be submitted, but with a choice of format as follows:

- as a traditional 2,500 word report, saved as a word file and posted to WebCT;
- as a traditional 2,500 word report which may be included as part of an HTML file; the file may include images/photographs, music, graphics;
- students who do not wish to attempt to load up an HTML file may, nevertheless, include photographs or other material and submit these with their one page executive summary to the assessment unit.

An initial questionnaire asked the students how they thought they would present their final paper. Three students wanted to present in writing, the 'traditional' way. Six thought they would present online, and one was unsure. Finally, four students developed web pages and presented their coursework online. Informal discussion later indicated that those who had 'changed their

minds' felt they would like to develop online material, but lacked the confidence to experiment. Therefore a new initiative has been to offer two hour-long workshops, with the tutors available a week prior to the assessment submission date, as a way of further developing students' skills and confidence in using IT.

Review of the innovation

Research by Martin (1999) suggests that there is a trinity of qualities that comprise a 'good teaching scale'. These are *enthusiasm*, *clear explanation* and *timely* feedback. Comments from the module monitoring forms reveal that the students' interest and enjoyment had been promoted by the practical tasks and element of groupwork incorporated in the module, and that the lecturers' teaching style has 'involved' the students. This positive feedback confirms the potentiality of online, group-based assessment for enhancing learning - especially when grounded in an approach to teaching characterised by the above qualities.

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Biographical notes

Debbie Holley is a Senior Lecturer in Purchasing and Supply Chain Management in the Department of Business and Service Sector Management. Debbie joined the University direct from industry in 1997, and retains many of her industry contacts. Her research interests are in using learning technologies to enhance student learning, using multi-media in teaching, and women managers in transport. She researches as part of the in-house 'Critical Learning Group' - see <http://critical-learning.co.uk/>.
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David Andrew is Programme Leader for the MA in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at London Metropolitan University and another member of the 'Critical Learning Group'. David has a particular interest in the use of learning technologies and assisted in the introduction to WebCT and the online work in the module.
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