Putting the *Learn* Back into Weblearn – using a VLE to promote independent learning.

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Introduction

This article reflects on the experience of creating an online learning sequence using Weblearn, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), as part of the module *Web-based Learning and Teaching* at London Metropolitan University. It will describe the development and delivery of a blended learning intervention using Weblearn with a class of international students on a pre-sessional Academic English course.

For many overseas students coming to study in the UK, one of the most pressing challenges is adapting to UK study culture. Many students are surprised by the relatively low number of contact hours on their course, and may not be aware of how much of their time should be spent studying outside class time. A key objective of the pre-sessional course is to encourage students to become more effective 'independent learners', but this has often proved difficult. The learning intervention created for this module aimed to increase the amount of time students spent learning outside the classroom, through structured activities created in Weblearn. Virtual Learning Environments have come in for a lot of criticism since their widespread adoption by UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over the past decade. (e.g., Wheeler, 2009; Davidson & Waddington, 2010) This article will reflect on the challenges encountered when attempting to use Weblearn as more than simply a content repository, and on how VLEs can enhance the student learning experience and encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Context

Technology enhanced learning is becoming an increasingly recognised and indispensable feature of higher education, no longer something which can be considered merely as an 'add-on', or the preserve of educational 'innovators' or 'early adopters' (Rogers, 1962, cited in Weller, 2007).There is little doubt that VLEs have been an integral part of this technological expansion. In 2006, a survey found

that 95% of universities in the UK had a VLE (Joinson, 2006). Nevertheless, despite this widespread adoption of VLEs "fuelled by utopian visions of a non-threatening, non-hierarchical, constructive (and constructivist) place for students and tutors to interact and learn" (Joinson, 2006), many began to question whether these systems were in fact positively contributing to the teaching and learning experience. A session at the ALT-C conference in 2009 entitled "The VLE is dead' reflects the kind of debate which has surrounded institutional learning environments in recent years. At that conference Steve Wheeler argued that the VLE "manages content, it does not actually promote learning at all, if there is any learning, this learning is incidental or accidental and it is usually done outside the VLE using other tools that are connected to it." (2009) The growing use of freely available and user-friendly Web 2.0 tools (blogs, social networks, wikis, social bookmarking, Flickr, YouTube etc.) has also served to highlight some of the limitations of typical VLEs, with some observers arguing that "the way in which we use these course management technologies is (...) far removed from the way in which people use technologies in their everyday lives." (Davidson and Waddington, 2010, p.3) By contrast, Web 2.0 technologies are often seen as "less restrictive and more 'social' in that they allow more flexibility and customisation to suit the preferences of the user" (Boyle & Jackson, 2009).

Rationale

One of the criticisms often levelled at VLEs is the apparent prevalence of 'instructor-centred pedagogies' which simply replicate the classroom or lecture theatre. (Lee, 2005; Sheely, 2006 cited in McLoughlin & Lee, 2008) However, learning is now widely acknowledged to be socially situated, and there is far more attention paid to the activities and processes involved in learning, with the learner taking centre stage. The aim of this intervention was to create a learning sequence in Weblearn which would be informed by the idea that "(1) learning is an active process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it, and (2) instruction is a process that involves supporting that construction rather than of communicating knowledge." (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, cited in Mason & Rennie, 2008)

In designing the module, a key consideration was whether effective use of a VLE could have a positive impact on students' learning experience, and engage learners' interest on a deeper level than so often seems to be the case in these environments. At an institutional level, the university has recently been renewing efforts to encourage teachers to use WebLearn and indeed, to incorporate e-learning more effectively into their practice. For example, the e-learning strategy document 'Towards an Institutional Strategy for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age' (2010) states that:

> *"Modules will have a WebLearn presence that uses the blended approach to optimise the best of face-to-face and e-learning methods."*

The WBLT module seemed to provide an ideal opportunity to gain a more evidence-based appreciation (or otherwise) of what the VLE could actually do, and whether it could effectively enhance the learning experience of one small group of students. In creating the learning intervention, I was inspired by the following idea from Martin Weller: "We are not waiting for a new technology to implement effective e-learning, just the imaginative application of existing tools." (2007)

Design & Delivery

The learning intervention was designed for a small group (12) of international students studying Academic English on a Pre-sessional course at the university. Learning outcomes needed to remain within the parameters of the course assessment tasks, which were already fixed as part of the syllabus. One of their assessments was a group presentation in the final week of the month, so a learning sequence was designed aimed at improving students' presentation skills. They were encouraged to collaboratively explore what makes a good presentation, look at some typical phrases and expressions used to 'signpost' a presentation, and learn more about how to create effective visuals using Powerpoint.

Whilst working on the design, I was keen to avoid simply uploading content and leaving students to their own devices. As Mason & Rennie (2008) suggest, there has been a "shift of focus in course design from an emphasis on providing content to an emphasis on designing activities that help students learn through interaction with sources, people and ideas." (p19) By using 'learning modules' within Weblearn to provide structure and sequence, rather than merely uploading content, students were guided through a series of learning activities. Good channels of communication and interaction between teacher and students and among students can have a profound effect on student motivation and learning (Angelo, 1993), the learning activities were therefore structured in such a way as to give students various opportunities for communication, both with the teacher and with each other through the email and discussion tools in Weblearn. The aim was to enhance the process of learning itself, and to support students in actively constructing meaning from the activities created for them, and from each other, and the hope was that this would be reflected in improved summative presentations at the end of the intervention.

The blend of online activities and time in class meant that it was possible to assess students' achievement of learning outcomes through face to face activities. For example, students were asked to explore a certain aspect of giving effective presentations through content made available in the module. They were then asked to discuss what they had learnt in their groups and give a short, informal presentation to the other groups in the class. This seemed to be a better way to assess students' progress towards the intended learning outcomes, as it allowed

evaluation of their progress towards these, while individual students could also learn from their peers and discuss and construct their ideas in groups.

The module was designed to adhere to the principle of 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999) which suggests that students construct meaning through undertaking activities and tasks, and that for this process to be successful, these must be aligned with the learning outcomes. Importantly, constructive alignment is about "getting students to take responsibility for their own learning, and establishing trust between student and teacher." (Houghton, 2004)

As previously mentioned, an important objective of the learning intervention was to increase the amount of learning taking place outside the classroom, and thereby to encourage students to develop their abilities as independent learners. Inculcating skills such as critical thinking, meta-cognition, reflection and the ability to find and use reliable sources of information can be difficult. Stimulating active engagement with learning outside the classroom would encourage students to move towards the 21st century learners described by Garrison and Anderson "critical and self-directed learners with the motivation and ability to be both reflective and collaborative, and, ultimately, with the motivation to continue to learn throughout their lives…" (2003, p.20).

Discussion

At the conclusion of the learning sequence, students were asked to complete a reflective task which asked them to think about their experience of learning using the VLE. The feedback was generally positive:

> *"The most helpful source for me in my work this month was our WebLearn. It helped me to find needed things very easy and also i can say that it really has encouraged me to do more self-study."*

> *"Using weblearn was a good experience for me. It really encouraged me to spend more time on self-study, to do homeworks really very well and to do all the exercises that was given."*

> *"I did more self-study thanks to this."*

> *"Regarding Weblearn, I thought that it was useful to contact my group members and teacher. And also, we can check homework details and extra suggestions relating our work. It was useful for studying."*

Of the negative comments, most were related to ease of use and access to learning activities:

"I can't use the internet in my own room, so sometimes it was annoying to get homework only using internet."

"I think one of the disadvantages of WebLearn is that we have to put our student account and password every time when we would like to access our WebLearn from our home, because we can't record that with like a cookie."

"to check several times during the day if we received a message or not, as we can't see it on our own e-mail box, is a bad point. Moreover, I can't save exercises done."

It is easy to understand some of the negative perceptions surrounding VLEs in general, and Weblearn in particular, especially when comparing it to the wealth of often free and user-friendly e-learning tools which exist online. However, only through using Weblearn as more than a content repository, both as a learner and as an educator, is it possible to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and gain a more informed perspective. Whilst I personally have become more favourably disposed towards VLEs, I still believe that they are just one tool which can be employed to meet the challenge of engaging learners and providing effective blended learning. As a platform for effective communication and collaboration on tasks and projects, I do not believe that the VLE currently in use in London Metropolitan is as user-friendly or intuitive as freely available services such as blogs, wikis, social networks, messenger and VOIP services, or sharing platforms such as Google Docs. Davidson and Waddington draw attention to John Dewey's assertion (from 1897!) that there should be a "high degree of continuity between the educational setting and the student's experience in everyday life." They go on to say that one of the problems they see with VLEs is that "the technologies do not match the everyday technological ecologies of students" (2010, p4) Weblearn does not lend itself particularly easily to Web 2.0 practices such as producing content, or synchronous communication and collaboration. For example, many students communicated with me directly through email for feedback, and this was quite time-consuming. There did not seem to be much communication within Weblearn between students. When working on group tasks they preferred to use other, more familiar tools – texts, IM, their own email or Skype, as these are generally easier to use.

Nevertheless, whichever technology is employed, it is not so much a question of what tools we use as educators, as what we do with those tools. Facilitation, moderation and giving feedback all require a lot of thought and must be carefully managed to ensure that learners are able to effectively engage with the learning outcomes. However, to use Weblearn to create and moderate activities which are truly learning-centred takes time, and practice. Although I would not go as far as Martin Weller (2007) who says that "if the miserable use most universities put Blackboard to (or whatever LMS they have) constitutes value for money then we're

all in trouble.", there is no doubt that VLEs are still falling short of the 'utopian visions' surrounding their inception.

Finally, the use of technology to enhance learning should not be an individual enterprise, carried out solely by 'innovators' and 'early adopters'. In order for it to be successful it requires coherent planning and investment in training, a clear strategy and support and encouragement for those 'at the chalkface'. With an updated VLE, Blackboard 9.1, on the horizon, and considering the current emphasis on e-learning provision within the university, surely this is an opportunity to encourage teachers to start using Weblearn in more innovative and (socially) constructive ways? Perhaps, as practitioners, we need to show more evidence of doing what we want our learners to do - collaborating with each other and creating a community of practice, sharing resources and constructing meaning together. In my view, this kind of commitment and engagement at an institutional level is essential if Weblearn is to be more than just an 'albatross around our teachers' necks'.

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