Going the distance – what students say about effective learning online

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Research Aims

Evaluate factors that determine online engagement and non-engagement:
- Learning community design
- Learning activity design
- Learning environment usability
- Online learner persona?

Improve learner experience on PGCert:
- Increase engagement
- Improve community
- Improve technology usability
Background

Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

- Two 30 credit modules (Semester 1: Enhancing Learning & Teaching Through Reflective Practice (ELTTRP), Semester 2: Developing Assessment for Learning (DA4L))
- Compulsory staff development for new academic staff
- Moved fully online in 2011-12
- 2012-13 evaluation
A Deficit as Starting Point

- PGCert completely online and compulsory for all new academic staff

  “Frustrating at times .. distance learning is not my preferred means of learning.”

- often on top of high workload, and

  “Time constraints due to work commitments” (DA4L)

- unfamiliar online learning environment

  “The module content is enjoyable and rewarding however navigating through that content is difficult, frustrating and ultimately reduces my capacity to connect with the material” (ELTTRP participant)
Improvements (Semester 1 to 2)
Models of Online Learning

- Situated Learning (Lave and Wenger)
- Community of Practice (Wenger)
- Conversational Framework (Laurillard)
- Social Constructivist Learning (using Salmon’s 5 Stage Model and e-tivity design)
Levels of participation

Observer

transactional

Peripheral

Occasional

Active

Core group

Leader

Coordinator

Experts

Apprentice

Outsiders

Lurkers

Clients

Beginners

Support

Sponsors

(Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, 2011)
Salmon’s Five Stage Model

Source: Gilly Salmon [http://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.htm](http://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.htm) (creative commons)
Research Design

- Survey (after each module)
- 6 Interviews (Semester 2: DA4L)
- Other sources:
  - (Standard) Module Evaluation Questionnaire
  - Adhoc feedback (e.g. Ask the Tutor Forum)
  - Reflections in assignments
What Students said .. *Impressions (DA4L)*
What Students said .. Online engagement

- “Time constraints due to work commitments”
- “I was not able to do the tasks each week and therefore it happened always with a huge delay.”
- “Other students were not participating in online discussions [...] therefore, it was difficult to engage in online discussions”
- “The design of the module felt complicated in comparison to previous module delivery, which had very clear alignment to learning outcomes and patchwork [assessment].”
- “The learning activities were carefully thought out so that each week built upon the last.”
- “Deep learning was made possible due to the availability of rich learning resources”
- “Familiarity with the structure and format, .. using a wiki etc.. leading to being more securely engaged.”
What Students said .. Engaging

To what extend did your online engagement with other participants engage you?

“My online engagement went down as the course progressed as fewer and fewer people engaged” (ELTTRP)

“However, once we were divided into small **groups** this was not a good experience. I had no feedback from fellow students and limited feedback from tutor which was often too late.” (ELTTRP)
What Students said .. Socially engaging

To what extend did your online engagement with other participants engage you socially?

“The face to face [Induction] sessions were the only opportunity to socialise”.

Different learning preferences: visual versus read / write
Active engaging (online activities) versus passive engagement (content)
Asynchronous E-tivities (G. Salmon)

Lead by: E-moderator

Activities:

Setting up activity
- illustrative title
  The „Spark“:
  „A small piece of information, stimulus or challenge“
  (max. 1 page)
- Invitation to participate

Participant:

Online Activities

1. Reading, exploring, thinking …
2. Posting contribution
   Response to spark & invitation
3. Interaction & Participation

E-moderator & Participant

Summary, feedback or critique from e-moderator

Elapsed time:
- offline/online
- offline
- online
- online
- offline/online
Summary

In the distance learning modules improvements were achieved by:

- Reducing the number of learning activities
- Distributing between content and peer engagement
- Requiring less engagement towards the end
- Increase the mix of media
- Improve navigation in VLE (less is more)

**Future developments:**

- More immediacy through synchronous sessions (webinars) and personalisation through social networks (e.g. Facebook group)
- Design activities which encourage engagement with work-based community / work colleagues
Discussion

1. How do you engage participants online when they don’t have time?

2. How can you develop a virtual learning community / community of practice for those who learn from engaging with others?

3. How can you encourage and promote engagement of participants in their work-based community?

4. How can you make the online environment a more “social” place?
References