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COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING AT A DISTANCE – A CASE STUDY AND DEVELOPING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE

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Overview

The pedagogical benefits of collaborative activity have been well recognised. It helps students to develop critical thinking skills, reflective abilities, team working skills and enable transformative learning by co-creation of knowledge (Pallof & Pratt, 1999). For subjects that require students to "... examine, assess and synthesise multiple perspective to resolve ill-structure problem" (Posey & Pintz, 2006), collaborative activity is seen as an integral part of teaching. Over the years, educators at The Open University (OU) have developed sophisticated online virtual laboratories, gamification and animation opportunities and a suite of tools to choose from to deliver and support collaborative online activities. However, academic teams at the OU continue to face many challenges in designing, delivering and supporting successful online collaborative activities.

In seeking to better support academic teams with delivery and support for online collaborative activities, the TEL Design team at The Open University produced a guide to good practice on collaborative online activities last year. This guide explains the purposes of online collaborative activities and makes explicit why they are beneficial. It outlines that we can deliver effective collaborative online activities by understanding the impact of online collaboration, making activities meaningful, paying attention to/catering for diversity and careful design and using appropriate tools for collaboration. It also provides exemplars on guidance for students, tutor support and assessing students' online collaboration (Open University, 2016).

This paper looks at a specific case study of how the good practices outlined in this guide can be used to achieve enhanced collaborative experience for learners with different social-cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances.

Methodology

Case study methodology is used here to illustrate how we design our digital pedagogy to manage diverse learners' needs in participating online collaboration. Focusing on a multi-disciplinary second level module, this paper will explain how we went about investigating the barriers that our students encountered when participating in an online collaborative activity. We will also elaborate on how the process of redesigning corresponds to a number of good practices featured by the guide to online collaborative activities.

Background

The guide was produced in August 2016, drawing on the real world experiences of several Open University academics and practitioners in designing and supporting collaborative activities, alongside some of the research available in the field. It aims to draw these sources together, alongside real-world examples to provide an easy to use and accessible guide for Open University staff.

The second level module in focus for this paper was launched in October 2012. This module features an online collaborative activity which assimilates a role play in the context of climate change debate. It also gives students an opportunity to create a position paper informing the direct of government policy in promoting green technology.

Process of investigation

By October 2014, we had sufficient data to conclude that many of our students struggled with this activity. To understand the issues, we carried out:

- an investigation using a number of Learning Analytics;
- a real-time project to seek student and tutor feedback;
- a mapping exercise to examine student workload throughout the module;
- an investigation to pinpoint when students withdrew from the module.

Students participating in the real-time project indicated difficulty keeping up with workload, which corroborated the student survey carried out in 2012-2014. The workload mapping pinpointed the study weeks for the online collaborative activity as particularly challenging. This mapping could not pinpoint workload for individual students but does provide an estimated anticipated workload for those weeks, for which there is evidence that this is an important factor for student retention (Toetenel & Rientes, 2016). These weeks also require the students to engage with an online activity that akin to a role play and collaborate on a position paper. For many students, this is the first time that they are required to work on an online collaborative activity.

Tutors indicated that having 10 calendar days to produce a collaborative output remotely was demanding for the students. It is also high risk as it relied on IT to align the permissions of the sub-forums with those for the synchronous audio tool. A questionnaire designed to survey the tutors' understanding of learner experience helped us to ascertain a different stakeholder's view. This added richness to our understanding of learner experience.

With the above data, we redesigned the block with the collaborative activity rewritten to even out workload, streamlined the forum structure to facilitate easy synchronous discussion and provide additional support for those who lack confidence in their digital skills. The collaborative activity was timetabled to take place towards the end of the learning unit with a warm-up activity prior to the bulk of the collaborative tasks. Furthermore, we communicated with students the intensity and requirements of this activity far in advance. We also sent out communications, recognising the time constraints and emotional challenges that some of our

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students might face as well as explaining the focus of the assessment was reflection of the experience rather than the quality of the position paper. In these communications, we explained explicitly how participating in this activity would enhance their employability. The tutors were fully briefed and guided through the changes to the activity and the module chair was on hand to answer queries throughout the activity.

We have received some data on the outcome of these interventions and are in a position to share some early analyses.

How this overlaps with the guide

The guide references three core stages to delivery of effective collaborative online activities: designing the activities, supporting the activities and providing feedback to students.

In addressing the issues for this second level module, we have had to retrospectively fix issues relating to all three of these stages. This can be seen as a good example of continual improvement, but is also reflective of where our understanding of collaborative activities was in 2012 when the module started. With the development of the guide, and the real-world experience of modules such as this one, we have now been able to develop our understanding and the internal knowledge base about collaborative activities and ensure that new module teams are able to start from a far stronger starting point.

Conclusion

The lessons from the experience with this module align well to the guidance. The module has found that it's important to:

- keep any supporting infrastructure as simple as possible;
- to ensure that any triggers for action by staff are clear;
- to provide choice for students in how they can collaborate;
- to provide clear warm up activities for the students to practice collaborating;
- to provide sufficient time, especially where it represents a dramatic shift in the style of learning on the module;
- to provide effective and clear guidance to the students.

These findings all marry up with the findings in the guidance, so we can see a good linkage between real-world experience and the guide. It also aligns with some of the findings of key studies in the field (Brindley et al., 2009; Zheng et al., 2015).

Additionally for this particular module, it is clear that the preceding curriculum does not fully embrace or provide students with experience of collaboration. As such, it is over a year into their study experience before some students first have to collaborate in a meaningful way with fellow students. Dealing with a diverse student population engaged in multiple qualifications makes this issue particularly challenging, as some students will have had plenty of exposure to these types of activities whereas other students won't, depending on their qualification choice.

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For those who haven't had exposure to collaborative activities, the introduction of them now at level two can challenge their expectation of distance learning.

Looking ahead for the future of collaborative activities in The Open University, we have very strong foundations now and a clear knowledge base to develop from. Our next challenge is to pick up on the issue of development of the student skills throughout their study and to ensure a full and clear progression rather than the current on/off experience dependent on the module.

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