

Experiential Learning, E-Learning And Social Learning: The EES Approach to Developing Blended Learning

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Abstract

This paper focuses upon the lessons learnt from the redesign of a traditionally delivered vocational module to one that utilised a blended learning strategy. The redesign was for a second year HND Human Resource Development module. This was an iterative, qualitative approach to change rather than a specific action learning project. As problems or areas for improvement were identified appropriate actions were taken. The paper explains how the redesign was focused upon helping students to become well balanced learners in relation to the stages in the experiential learning cycle and developing strengths with regard to their learning styles. The paper also highlights the importance of social learning theory and andragogy when designing new learning experiences for students. The paper starts with a review of the main concepts that underpinned the redesign of the module.

E-Learning

E-learning refers to a number of learning technologies that incorporate Information Communication Technologies (ICT). These can include both synchronous communication, for example webcam conferences and chatrooms, and asynchronous e-learning tools such as email and webboards. Recent advances in learning technology have also extended to the use of blogs, wikis and podcasts available through integrated learning environments. Advantages of e-learning include the direction of learning being defined by users (Fox 2007) and that it can include varying combinations of content (MacDonald and Thompson 2005). E-learning also has benefits for students with particular difficulties. For example, Hurst (2002) identified that placing materials on the web can be beneficial for students whose disabilities prevent them from taking notes. E-learning can also provide educational access to those who could not easily attend classroom based sessions because of other commitments such as full-time paid employment or being outside the geographical location of the higher education provider. E-learning enables education to be delivered at a distance (Connolly *et al.* 2005).

E-learning strategies, whilst allowing flexibility, have also been criticised on a number of grounds. E-learning is costly to develop, the quality of materials may not be good and there can be problems with computers crashing (Gibb 2002; Marchington and Wilkinson 2002). There has also sometimes been a tendency for e-learning initiatives to be driven by the technology rather than how people learn. It has been argued that this was the reason behind the failure of the UK government sponsored UKeU Connolly *et al.* 2006). In addition, interaction through discussion is important for learning (Abercrombie 1993) yet there is an absence of human interaction with e-learning. Students can find it difficult if they are not able to develop face-to-face relationships with the lecturer (Telford 1995, Gibb 2002, Marchington and Wilkinson 2002) and the lack of personal interaction can actually be a reason why students do not engage with e-learning based courses (Buzzetto-More and Sweat-Guy 2006). It can also be difficult for a tutor to convey enthusiasm about a subject when not face-to-face with students, an important issue raised by Alexander and Boud (2001). Therefore, university tutors face challenges as they seek to maximise the student learning experience whilst implementing e-learning strategies. This leads to considering the use of blended learning strategies.

Blended Learning

The interpretation of blended learning that underpins this paper is that it is a learning strategy that combines e-learning techniques with traditional face-to-face learning approaches (Joy-Matthews *et al.* 2004, Mortera-Gutierrez 2006). Blended learning provides social interaction (Mortera-Gutierrez, 2006) that can be missing from e-learning only approaches. But there are also paradoxes with regard to the use of e-learning in a blended learning approach. It has been argued that e-learning empowers students with regard to choosing when to study (Connolly *et al.* 2005), Yet, as Vaughn (2007) highlighted, a blended learning strategy also brings challenges for students including time management and being responsible for their learning. Alongside this, when utilising e-learning technology, it is important to understand how students engage with the learning process (Mortera-Gutierrez 2006). Reece and Walker (1997) also suggested that it is important to understand the student learning process with regard to the stages in the experiential learning cycle, as outlined by Kolb *et al.* (1991). This is particularly with regard to diversity in relation to Honey and Mumford's (1995) different learning styles and the need to help students become well balanced learners. This is another factor that would be difficult to incorporate through an e-learning only approach but that can be incorporated into a blended learning strategy.

Social Learning Theory

A blended learning strategy can lead to increased social interaction and social learning, more so than with an e-learning only approach. As social learning theory shows those who share similar interests interact in a way that leads to the sharing of both tacit skills and tacit knowledge. As a result it creates an extension of the learning that occurs in the classroom and thus has the potential to develop the ability of students to develop their understanding of areas of interest. Social learning theory suggests that those with a shared background may engage in 'Communities of Practice' (COPs) whereby they engage in sharing information, tacit knowledge (that which is not written down) and these can also provide support networks (Gibb 2002). As students have a shared frame of reference, the module learning experience, we can potentially help them to develop how they learn from each other outside the classroom. By using face-to-face seminar sessions and other forms of group work, students can share their tacit knowledge and experiences. On a module such as Human Resource Development this can relate to the knowledge that students have gained from their observations during either full-time or part-time employment. The blended learning approach can also extend this to the design considering theories underpinned by andragogy. This can be achieved by providing the opportunity to draw upon the students' experiences from work and their personal lives as well as placing emphasis upon them directing their learning. This, in turn, will help to increase their motivation with regard to being engaged with the module learning.

Case Study: Developing the Blended Learning Strategy for the HND HRD Module

Drawing upon the concepts discussed so far the following explains how the HND HRD module was redesigned to incorporate a blended learning strategy. The module redesign focused upon incorporating e-learning, a range of teaching and assessment methods together with a flexible approach to learning in order to:

- Develop a blended learning strategy for students studying a vocational course to enhance student learning
- Incorporate a wide and appropriate range of teaching and learning methods that will inspire learning
- Impact on the learning experience and promote students' capability to be autonomous learners

The blended learning approach was achieved by redeveloping the module so that the lecture content was delivered via a CD rom which was written by the module leader.

The CD included very detailed lecture notes for each week. These were fully referenced and included up to 30 slides for each week's session. In addition to the lecture material the CD contained:

- Guided reading
- Details of seminar activities
- Guidance on Harvard referencing
- Assignment briefs
- Guide to online journals
- Other sources of information

Students were expected to read around the course material (detailed lecture slides and seminar activities), together with additional reading which included appropriate textbooks, academic articles, websites and journals. Some of this reading was guided and others left to the discretion of the students so that they could develop skills with regard to developing information skills. At various points during the academic year each student was given a CD-rom with the material for the next five/six weeks of the module together with information about the next assignment. The material was developed so that it could be used by students with disabilities, in order to "make the delivery of the programme as inclusive as possible" (QAA, cited in Hurst 2002:220). The aim of the CD was to develop the students' skills of self motivation and time management in order to assist them in becoming more autonomous learners. The design of this module meant that students had the flexibility of only having to attend for a short amount of time each week but that they had detailed material to access whenever they were working at a computer.

The time that had been traditionally allowed for a one hour lecture/one hour seminar was reallocated into four 30 minute seminar sessions of 3-6 students every week. This approach allowed me to reallocate the

contact hours so that they had smaller groups with more individual attention. This also provided them with the opportunity to develop their communication skills as they discussed the reading that they had undertaken and the activities that they had prepared for. Emphasis was placed upon the need for students to undertake the activities that were detailed on the CD. Students were also encouraged to email the module tutor and/or make individual appointments if they had missed a class or needed further guidance.

The assignments were also designed to encourage students to further engage with the module and to develop skills in reflection, literature reviewing and applying practical skills. These skills were combined with the IT skills needed to access the CD material and the related managing of the learning process. The module was redesigned so that it could cater for the diversity of learning needs with regard to the different ways in which individuals learn. Honey and Mumford (1995) provide guidance on activities that individuals can become involved with to develop their least preferred learning styles. This guidance was incorporated into the module redesign. Firstly, in order to develop activist styles students were encouraged to action something new each week, as a result of reading articles and becoming involved in seminar activities relating to the new topic that had been introduced. By encouraging them to 'read something heavy' Honey and Mumford (1995:24) i.e. reading the journal papers that were on the recommended lists they were working towards developing their theorist learning styles.

The theorist style was also developed in seminar activities based upon understanding complex issues, such as those presented in case studies. The students were 'collecting techniques' (Honey and Mumford 1997:27) both in relation to the different ways of learning that were used for delivering the module (on-line sources, lectures, seminar activities) and specific techniques for designing training, learning and development programmes (different training methods, techniques for analysing training needs, techniques for designing training programmes etc). This helped them to develop their pragmatist learning styles. Finally, with regard to developing the reflector learning style students were encouraged to review their learning on a regular basis through activities such as seminar discussions and summative assessments during the year. By developing their least preferred learning styles students would find it easier to progress round the stages of Kolb *et al's* (1991) experiential learning cycle and thus become more balanced learners.

Evaluating the Process

As well as the incorporation of the ideas already discussed the design and implementation of the blended learning strategy involved considered reflection and discussion with colleagues. From the inception of the idea I regularly discussed its implementation with the HND course leader because of his length of experience with these students. Three colleagues commented upon the CD as it was developed and revisions were made based upon their feedback. A thirty minute seminar session, delivered in the early stages of the term, was observed by my Divisional Leader. She commented that she did not feel that there was any learning advice that she could have given me to have improved the session.

Despite all of the consideration given to the design and delivery of the blended learning strategy there were still a number of unexpected outcomes. During the first term part of term one I had concerns that some students were not engaging with the module as fully as I had hoped. The majority of the students appeared to be lacking motivation to read the lecture material or prepare for the seminar sessions. As a result of this half way through the first term I moved from the thirty minute seminar slots to sixty minute sessions so that they could undertake all preparation for the seminar whilst in the classroom. As the hour allocated to the lecture was being used for one of the seminar groups, i.e. there were two seminar groups, it still meant that seminar sizes were smaller than if we had continued with the traditional one hour lecture/one hour seminar split. There was also a problem with some, but not all, of the University's computers in that they could not access the hyperlinks on the CD. During the period whilst IT worked on this problem the lecture notes for each week were also posted onto webboards.

When students were asked to complete their course evaluation form at the end of the first term some did raise concerns about the use of blended learning for this module. I did then have reservations about whether to continue with the blended learning format as this was the first module in the school to be using this particular type of blended learning. However, for the first assignment the completed work showed, in overall terms, an improvement compared to when the module was delivered via traditional lectures. I discussed these issues with the HND course leader. He was extremely supportive and proposed that I continued with the delivery of the module in the blended learning format for the complete year so that students became used to this type of learning. In order to understand the problems that students may be having in motivating themselves, and thus

becoming more autonomous learners, I asked them to further evaluate the module in the first session of the second term. Students were provided with a number of open ended questions to answer and I left the room whilst they completed these. I explained that they could discuss their replies with other students but to make sure that their answers represented their personal views. I also asked them to be totally honest when completing the forms and explained that the feedback would be completely confidential. The questions combined asking students about their comments on how the module had been delivered and asking for their views on potential changes.

Feedback from Student Evaluation

The students appeared to have differing views about the extent to which the module redesign had helped them with their learning with regard to HRD. For example one student said:

“The CD Rom has been useful with regard to the HRD module as it is a different method of learning. Although at times, the CD has been overpowering and complicated with regard to understanding where each week’s lecture and seminar notes were. This is different to my other lectures and I don’t think that I’m learning as much because I’m teaching myself the subject. However, so far I feel that I can/have understood the work” with another explaining *“at the beginning of the year I did not like the idea of having a CD-Rom instead of a lecture. I did not think that the CD-Rom would make me work as hard as I would do normally. However, when it came to completing assignments I noticed that I had learnt more than I expected I would. I think this was from reading all of the slides”*

Although there were positive comments when asked about ways in which they felt that the CD-ROM hindered their learning there were also some points highlighted. For example students appeared to be concerned that they could not get immediate face-to-face feedback from the module tutor when reading through the lecture slides:

“The CD Rom method means that I am teaching myself and if any problems arise, like if I don’t understand a certain part, then I can’t ask a teacher (although I can email Amanda but I feel that face-to-face explanation is better as might understand it better). In other lectures, we can directly ask the teacher if we don’t understand something straight away. Problems could be overcome by making a note of issue encountered and ask Amanda in the next seminar.”

Another issue raised appeared to relate to motivation to engage with the material when involved with self directed reading of the CD based lecture material. This was highlighted by the comment

“ Really can’t be bothered to read the lecture notes so don’t learn”

For some students issues relating to self motivation also appeared in relation to asking students whether they would prefer less content on the lecture slides but more directed reading.

“If there was more directed reading on the CD-Rom I do not think that I would access the other sources myself. I would prefer the CD to stay as it is”. Another student also said *“Would not prefer more directed reading as I probably would not access the information myself”*

This did not apply to all students, thus highlighting the different ways in which students are motivated to engage with the learning. For example

“The content on the lecture slides is sufficient as we are provided with all the information needed. However, if they did contain websites, books for us to look at ourselves, this would be beneficial as I would feel like I was learning more by reading it for myself. I would access the other sources.”

Students were also asked to comment upon the content of the CD. Overall the students appeared to feel that changes needed to be made. One of the main concerns appeared to be that students felt overwhelmed by the amount of material on the slides *“Also not to have so many slides as this feels overwhelming as we have many pages to look at”* This was interesting because when designing the material for the lecture slides the plan had been to include a similar amount of material to that which would have been delivered in a one hour lecture – but clearly students perceived this as being too much. Other comments included

“I often feel that there are large amounts of reading to do on the CD-Rom and I find that by the end of the reading I have forgotten most of the information” Although, in contrast, there was also the view that there should be *“More information and better lecture notes instead of having to get relevant information ourselves.”*

An important part of the evaluation process was to understand the students' own perceptions as to how the learning experience could be improved. The fifth question focused upon gaining feedback from students with regard to how they felt that they could learn better. Option a) was focused upon more use of e-learning and less face-to-face interaction with the tutor and other students. Option b) was to continue with the blended learning approach ie the CD plus a one hour seminar each week. Responses included

“that by having an hour seminar each week I feel that I can have any problems dealt with on a personal basis (by discussing it with the teacher)” to “I feel that having the freedom to complete work when you want to is a better option than the seminars. Also when few people turn up to the seminar I think it is not helpful as you don't learn as much.”

There appeared to be no consensus from students with regard to their preferences. Others still wanted face-to-face interaction but suggested that the balance should be towards more e-learning together with the face-to-face interaction, but limiting this to half hour seminars each week. Yet, when the module had previously had half hour seminars attendance had been relatively low – which was difficult when the groups were designed to have a maximum of six students per session. This again suggested different individual factors affecting their views, such as motivation and the different ways in which people learn.

There appeared to be no consensus with regard to how the students felt that the presentation of the CD could be improved. For example one respondent said:

“I feel that there is too much writing on each slide. Also, the information on the CD seems to be mixed up and it doesn't flow from slide to slide”

whilst another view with regard to changes being made was *“no way, I like it”* although the same student did say that their engagement would be improved

“by having less information on each slide. Where there is too much to read on one slide I don't always take all of the information in and sometimes skip reading parts”.

This appears to link with earlier comments about providing students with too much information. A further question asking students to compare this module to other modules highlighted the need for face-to-face interaction with both the tutor and other students:

“I feel that I haven't learned as much on the HRD module as the others because I am teaching myself” and “going through the CD in small groups may help with increased engagement, this way we can discuss the topic with other students”.

Based upon these evaluations I wanted to maximise the learning for all students on the module as much as I could within the resource constraints and the mixed learning abilities of the students. I was limited to the immediate changes that I could make to the module during the year, and I still wanted the students to engage with the material on the CD so that they could develop themselves as autonomous learners. As a result of the feedback the immediate change that I made was to set a list of questions relating to each week's lecture slides. The students had to bring these answers to the seminar session and I found that nearly all of the students had prepared for them and were able to answer them in class. The students seemed to be motivated by showing what they knew in a safe way i.e. all of the answers could be found on the Powerpoint slides on the CD. By the end of the year the students seemed much happier with the blended learning strategy and module results were also good.

Lessons Learnt From the Blended Learning Strategy

A number of important lessons have been learnt which will underpin future development of blended learning strategies. I think that the biggest lesson that I learnt from this was that although students may benefit from learning at their own pace they do not want to feel 'abandoned' and miss the familiarity of the traditional approach to lecturers delivering lectures. More specifically the lessons learnt included the following:

- Focus must be on the student learning experience rather than a desire to promote a particular form of e-learning
- The blended learning strategy used benefited students by maximising the use of technology whilst retaining the personal interface and introducing flexibility into the module delivery

- Student engagement must be observed to ascertain whether there are problems in the mix between e-learning and personal interaction.
- The implementation of a new form of delivery must be an iterative process with changes made as soon as appropriate rather than waiting until the next academic year.
- Design the blended learning strategy so that it assists students in developing their least preferred learning styles – this will help them to develop themselves into more balanced learners thus helping to progress more effectively around the experiential learning cycle as they become involved with new experiences.
- Students benefit from learning at their own pace and have different learning styles but they do not want to feel ‘abandoned’; weekly scheduled contact with the module tutor(s) and other students is important. A vital part of a learning strategy for undergraduate full-time students is to facilitate social interaction and social learning to aid the sharing of both explicit and implicit knowledge.
- A number of benefits were associated with using a CD as the e-learning tool. This included students being able access the material even if they cannot afford access to broadband. Cost implications such as this are important with the emphasis upon widening participation
- However there are also potential problems with the technology. Students may have problems accessing the electronic material. This can be mitigated against by encouraging students to access the material several days in advance for the relevant session so that any problems can be identified when there is still time to take appropriate action.
- Staff may also need to develop the appropriate skills required to design and deliver blended learning material – the tutor who redesigned this module found that she was teaching herself as she redeveloped the module.

Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated, in practice, a hybrid approach that bridges traditional forms of delivery and e-learning within the context of a higher education institution. Blended learning benefits students and staff by maximising the use of technology whilst retaining the personal interface and introducing flexibility into the module delivery. As demonstrated it benefits students with a diverse range of needs. As lecture material can be accessed electronically outside of the teaching room the hour allocated to a face-to-face lecture was reallocated to seminars meaning smaller seminar groups. Smaller groups benefit both tutors and students by allowing more in-depth discussions and personal interaction. Students felt more comfortable about approaching the tutor with problems/issues/points that they did not understand. E-learning, in isolation, can make social interaction between students studying the same topic difficult, it can, therefore, also impact upon the extent to which social learning is possible. Blended learning overcomes this limitation of an e-learning only approach. In addition, a blended learning strategy can be designed so that students are able to develop all of the learning styles identified by Honey and Mumford (1995) including the least preferred learning styles. This will help students to become more balanced learners as they reflect upon their activities and move round the experiential learning cycle. The paper makes its contribution to existing knowledge about e-learning and blended learning in higher education by highlighting the importance of incorporating elements of **E**-learning, **E**xperiential learning and **S**ocial learning when designing a blended learning strategy for full-time undergraduate students i.e. the EES Approach to Blended Learning. In summary, blended learning approaches help to provide the transition from a traditional teaching approach to one that utilises e-learning whilst maintaining the tutor/student interaction. Lessons from this case study can be transferred to developing blended learning strategies utilising the interactive elements of integrated learning environments together with face-to-face contact and social interaction.

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