

Promoting an autonomous stance to researching workplace issues



Commenced: 2006

What is it?

Though transition to appropriate learning practices are important for all HE students, it is particularly important for MA students because there are greater expectations about their ability to manage their studies to reflect personal and/or professional interests; similarly, there are expectations about abilities to study independently from distance-learning students. These students are expected "to have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher" (Wenden 1991:15); that is, to behave as autonomous learners. However, a significant amount of time has usually elapsed between the completion of an undergraduate degree and enrolment on an MA course. Also, students on these courses are used to creating and representing knowledge in ways that are significantly different from academic practices. Such factors create specific challenges for post-graduate students and tutors alike.

The project seeks to enhance student learning experiences by fostering the development of autonomy and of research skills through the use of the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Specifically, the CETL project aims to develop learning autonomy by: creating opportunities for self-assessment, peer formative assessment and portfolio-based assessment on a Research Design module developing students' understanding of research skills. This is in preparation for conducting small scale research for their dissertation project relating the expectations of post-grad professional course, as set out in the QAA Master's specifications, to the investigation of workplace issues enabling students to develop a new identity as a 'critical practitioner'.

What is involved?

The project will combine an action research project and a practical component. The action research project will take the form of an 'online ethnography' of 2006/7 students. My position will be that of researcher-participant. In addition to supporting module-based activities, I would in parallel engage with students (in the VLE and/or via e-mail) in "conversation and meaning making through repeated, revisited and jointly interpreted conversations that support reflection and revision, an essential and most common element of virtual

ethnography" (Crichton and Kinash 2003). These 'conversations' would aim to uncover how students view autonomy as postgraduate professionals. The practical component involves creating a different form of Blackboard (Bb) experience for students. Assessment will be based around a series of online tasks requiring students to develop an 'online portfolio' throughout the life of the Research Design module, instead of a final essay (thereby taking on board some of the messages from the 'Profile Assessment' initiative within the ACES faculty). The 'static' part of the practical component is now completed (though small alterations will be likely, in response to students' comments and behaviour). The 'dynamic' part consists of students' online work, and will be unfolding during the 2006-7 academic year. A key feature is the use of individual wikis for students to post ongoing work and reflections on different research skills. Each student is expected to use wikis and discussion forums to post comments on any aspect of their research design, and to offer comments on other students' work. This is in recognition that "student autonomy is not a characteristic which resides in a student, but a relational quality of student and task" (Boud 1988:34).

Why is the project important to the CETL and the University?

The University attracts a significant number of professional people in a range of Master's degree courses. As the aim of such courses is to equip students with knowledge and skills to investigate, consolidate and/or reform workplace practices, it is likely that both the practical component of the CETL project (the Bb site) and the research will be of interest to other tutors engaged professional post-graduate education.

What do you hope the project will achieve?

The CETL project creates a focus to change the way in which students are assessed in order to enhance their overall learning experience. It will provide different approaches to supporting student personal reflection and learning. It is hoped that students, initially on the RD module, and subsequently on their dissertation module, will find that on-going engagement with other students through different online facilities enhances their appreciation of critical and research skills.

By providing a variety of electronic means for students to submit ongoing work for electronic feedback from peers and tutors, it is hoped to promote more use of formative assessment with the Professional Communication MA Programme, and to enable students to become more autonomous learners.

What impact do you hope the project will have?

The initial impact of the project will be on learning, teaching, and assessment within the Research Design module of Professional Communication MA programme. A second phase of the project will be to monitor the impact of the CETL project on the approaches taken by students in constructing their dissertation projects. Another impact will be to review the forms of assessment offered in other modules, and to assess the uses of the VLE, in order to seek opportunities for aligning learning activities, assessment, and feedback.

The preliminary outputs of the CETL project will be used as input into the revalidation of the MA Program in 2006/7. Dissemination of the results of this project across the University and to the wider community may contribute to enhanced learning, teaching and assessment by helping inform colleagues of the possibilities of using on-going 'portfolio' types of assessment to promote learner autonomy through engagement in self-reflection, critical evaluation, and formative feedback.

Future Developments

This project is part of the on-going development of the Blackboard VLE for the MA Program offered by Communication Studies (ACES Faculty). This has led to individual Blackboard modules being set up following a standard 'template', some with an explicit remit to support autonomous approaches to learning. The detailed knowledge gathered as part of the online ethnography will be used to review module descriptors for the course validation, and to assess the possibility of developing different approaches to assessment; for example, on-going online portfolio types of assessment. The goal will be to "promote means of transferring responsibility for the learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner" (Cotterall 2000:110).

Links

- Boud D (1988) 'Moving towards autonomy', in D. Boud (Ed) Developing Student Autonomy in Learning (2nd edition), London: Kogan Page, pp.17-39
- Cotterall S. (2000) 'Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses', ELT Journal, vol. 54, no. 2, pp.109-117
- Crichton S. and Kinash S. (2003) 'Virtual Ethnography: Interactive Interviewing Online as Method', vol. 29, no. 2, Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology, available at <http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/300/cdn_jrn_learning_and_tech/2003/v29n02/www.cjlt.ca/content/vol29.2/cjlt29-2_art-5.html> [Accessed June 9th 2006]
- Wenden, A. (1991) Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy, Prentice Hall

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