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Harnessing digital potential: a curriculum approach to the use of Digital Learning Environments (0089)

Programme number: C7

Research Domain: Digital University

Background

The *Australian youth work education: curriculum renewal and a model for sustainability for niche professions* project was funded in 2010 under the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's *Priority Projects Program* which responds to priorities determined by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Board.

In a review of the curriculum renewal programme for ALTC, Hicks (2009) noted that in funding requests received by the ALTC under the curriculum renewal programme 'There was little recourse to literature on curriculum'. Barnett and Coate (2005, p.13) had observed that curriculum was a 'missing term' in UK higher education documents. In the absence of an explicit concept of curriculum, course and program outlines often become lists of required content. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, lists of content expand over time because staff identify additional content readily but delete content less readily. Secondly, if courses are defined by informational content, there is a risk conceptual learning and purpose, become weakened.

The research reported had three strands. The first strand comprised conceptual work in the scholarship of teaching to determine the implications of Barnett and Coate (2005) approach for the Australian youth work education curriculum. Threshold Concepts (Akerlind et al 2011; Meyer & Land 2006) were added later as a helper methodology. This presentation discusses the use of a DLE within a first-year course to realise intended curriculum purposes.

Educational purpose and curriculum framework

Barnett & Coate's (2005) curriculum approach suggests that higher education curriculum should comprise elements in three domains, 'knowing' 'acting' and 'being' (or 'becoming'). Performative approaches to curriculum focus mainly upon 'knowing' and sometimes 'acting' but rarely encompass 'being' because purposes in this domain are not readily assessable performatively. A Threshold Concepts methodology was used to translate the programme-wide purposes into disciplinarily relevant curriculum in the course.

Context: the programme and the students

The course is offered as a core component within a Youth Work degree programme at a 'New Generation' Australian university. The course explores 'youth issues' from a sociological perspective. It is usually taken in first year, first semester, but is also available as an elective. The university has an explicit

admissions policy designed to broaden participation, most students are admitted by alternative entry pathways, and many are 'first in family' at university. Students with this profile require strong support for transition to university.

As part of the curriculum renewal process, staff identified several areas for improvement in this course, even though previous student evaluations were positive. The main areas for improvement identified were:

- ◆ Improve support for transition
- ◆ Incorporate more active learning and peer support
- ◆ Make the on-line experience more similar to the on-campus experience

Threshold Concepts identified included:

- ◆ To learn to think sociologically
- ◆ To support students to bridge between their personal experience life-world and academic learning through activities that included personal reflection and comparison between common-sense assumptions and research findings (Myth-busting)

Before redevelopment, the course was taught on-campus through a two-hour lecture plus a one-hour tutorial, and online through written course materials, an unstructured electronic discussion forum and tutor support by email.

In 2013, 57 students completed the course on-campus and 45 students completed on-line. The course was organised as two 3-hour seminars on-campus, and peer learning was supported both on-line and on-campus. The course materials were completely revised to reflect curriculum changes.

DLE: how it was used and what it enabled

Use of DLE for all students

- ◆ Repository for all course materials, PowerPoint presentations: this meant that staff were not under pressure to present all materials and could focus on student support
- ◆ A list of approved websites and journals for the myth-busting research project
- ◆ Provide 'transition to university' support including academic support, materials to support group learning, collaboration without plagiarism, expectations of independent university learning
- ◆ Sharing of student generated resources

For on-campus students

- ◆ Group tools for collaboration: as a means to provide support for a group work project, where group members collaborated but had different tasks that were assessed individually. Each group nominated a facilitator, whose task was to project manage and report progress and problems weekly. This facilitated timely staff support.

For online students

- ◆ Supported virtual partnered project
- ◆ Wiki: for research collaboration on partnered project and communication with their partner.
- ◆ Structured discussion forums for each discussion topic, similar to on-campus class discussions to support 'cognitive presence' Garrison, R. (2011).

- ◆ Allocated online discussion groups to build 'social presence' Garrison, R. (2011)

Lessons learnt

The preliminary student evaluation indicated that from students' perspectives the redevelopment had been successful. They welcomed transition support and valued the activities that connected learning with their own experience. Some online students reported frustration that their partners were not as responsive as they would have hoped, but did not blame the course for this. Online students reported that they felt they had been well-supported. The staff evaluation indicated that staff felt that the redevelopment had improved the course and achieved intended outcomes.

From a staff perspective the embedded transition support had not detracted supported students' disciplinary learning. The myth-busting focus had successfully bridged the divide between a sociological and a commonsense worldview. There was better alignment between the on-campus and on-line experiences, but there is room for further development. Staff enjoyed the changed style of teaching. This was the first time they had used Wikis or online collaboration tools, and in future they plan use additional features within the DLE including Adobe Connect for synchronous online teaching. The staff evaluation identified a number of adjustments to improve processes and concluded that support from the academic development unit had been crucial to the success of the implementation, both for technical support to customise the DLE and for individualised staff support to enable fuller use of the DLE.

Conclusions

The DLE improved social presence especially for online students and added to cognitive presence for all students. The DLE facilitated collaborative learning and peer learning and made it easier for tutors to focus on student support. The extension of use of the DLE was only possible because of intensive support for staff from the academic development unit.

Acknowledgements

Australian Youth Work Education: Curriculum Renewal and a Model for Sustainability for Niche Professions was funded by Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and conducted through a partnership between Edith Cowan University, with Australian Catholic University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University and Victoria University. Tabor College (Adelaide) is an associate partner of this project. The implementation of curriculum renewal at Edith Cowan University was additionally supported by the Centre for Learning Development.

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