

Identifying The Challenges of Technologies With Transnational Post-Graduate Students

Boulton Helen, *Nottingham Trent University, UK*

This paper will report interim findings of an 18 month project, funded by the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom (UK), to identify the differences in experience, expectation and engagement of using a Western designed virtual learning environment (VLE) with post-graduate students in the East. The focus of the research is a Professional Doctorate course delivered by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and taught in Hong Kong. The course is taught in Hong Kong over 4 weekends each year with supervisory support throughout the academic year by academics at NTU and additional support through a VLE.

A key challenge for the teaching team has been in engaging the students based in Hong Kong in using the VLE. The research has been framed around the notion of whether there is unconsciously an ethno-centric bias in the use of the VLE. The intended outcomes of the project centre around greater engagement by the Hong Kong students in using the VLE, a deeper level of learning and a faster pace of progression by the students, and thus developing evidence-informed practice that can be shared widely.

While literature is extensive in using technologies in learning and teaching, and in teaching international students there appears to be no research focussing on the use of new technologies designed in the West and used in course delivery in the East. In terms of cultural differences Hofstede (1985) identified the need for culture to be acknowledged in teaching and learning while Carroll and Ryan (2005) identified a need to be explicit in the purpose and structure of activities and assessment; while this assertion is based on classroom focused research it impacts on online learning. Brown (2004) drawing on Gestalt cognitive theory asserts that the personal theories of learning and constructs of international students differs widely from the Western norm, which can hamper learning. Maclean and Ransome (2005) identify studying in a second language, adjusting to an unfamiliar educational context and perceptions of workload can impede international students.

In terms of the use of VLEs these have been used in United Kingdom (UK) schools, colleges and universities since the 1990s providing a 'combination of communications tools and file-sharing applications' (Gillespie et al, 2007, p 3) which are designed as an information space in which interactions occur and students become actors in co-constructing the virtual space (Dillenbourg et al, 2002). There are many drivers to using new technologies in Higher Education, for example Laurillard (2008, p 1) states 'never before has there been such a clear link between the needs and requirements of education, and the capability of technology to meet them. It is time we moved education beyond the brink of being transformed, to let it become what it wants to be'. However, there are equally arguments against using new technologies in learning and teaching. For example Kersh, Pachler and Daly (2009, p 2) state that 'digital technologies alone do not facilitate learning'.

Initial research with the Hong Kong students indicated that prior VLE experience has been minimal in comparison to that of UK based students. The use of VLEs in UK universities has changed the way learning and teaching takes place with an increased use of a range of technologies such as blogs, wikis, twitter, and eportfolios (Hardy and Clughen, 2012). These changes are resulting in new and emerging pedagogy and changes in the way courses are being delivered in the UK with an increasing expectation that both staff and students have good levels of digital literacy. Indeed standards for lecturers, set out by the Higher Education Academy (UK) in their Professional Standards Framework have been updated (2011) to place a greater emphasis on the use of digital technologies and digital literacy skills. This is a different perspective to that in Hong Kong.

The paper will address how the research is impacting on the design of the VLE, the successes and challenges faced by the teaching team and how the changes made to the VLE are engaging the students.

Methods/Methodology:

As stated above this is an interim report on an evaluative longitudinal research project (Bassegy, 1999). The context for the research is set out in the above section. The students involved in the research are all enrolled on the Professional Doctorate in Education at Hong Kong College of Technology, delivered by NTU. The students attend weekend workshops and are supported by supervisors based in the UK with access to the VLE (n=35). Students are aged 25 to 68 and comprise 19 males and 13 females.

Initially baseline data indicated that only 9 of the Hong Kong students had accessed the VLE, varying from one to 17 accesses each. The length of time spent in the VLE ranged from 1 minute to 9 hours. Data is currently being collected over a one year period through observations of the use of the VLE by HKCT students through metrics available via the VLE's software and by interviews conducted with the students and analysed thematically.

Expected outcomes/results

To date analysis of initial data indicate that assumptions of the levels of technological expertise by the course team had been aligned with the experiences of UK students. Aspects of differences between western and eastern students coming out of the research are in use of images, format, language and layout; these will be further explored and results presented at the conference.

Changes in the use of the VLE by a new cohort where an induction included demonstration of the VLE has resulted in a higher level of engagement and indicates a greater sense of confidence in accessing the VLE. Various activities, using Salmon's 5-step model of engaging students with technologies, delivered through the VLE between taught weekends in Hong Kong, designed to engender collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, have also impacted on engaging the students. This multi-layered approach appears to be proving a more positive experience for the Hong Kong students.

Intent of Publication:

Following the conference it is intended to publish the article in the British Journal of Educational Technology.

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