0157

Exploration & Experimentation: Applying New Technologies to Learning - 2nd Stage Action Research

Andrea Moon
University of Brighton, Brighton, E Sussex, United Kingdom

Background

There is a plethora of information on enhancing learning through technology and explaining the benefits of blended learning, but the practice still does not appear to be widespread. Bach et al (2007) remind us that technologies improve rapidly but that practice takes more time to become established. They also advise that whilst HEIs may seek to encourage the practice of on-line learning, costly mistakes clearly have to be avoided.

The principal aim of the author's action research was (and still is) how to empower first year undergraduate students to become independent learners through the adoption of e-learning strategies. It began, however, as part of a collaborative research project investigating how to learn about new technologies available within the authors' own institution (Greener, S and Moon, A. 2009) Some of the conclusions reached at that stage indicated that new technology and support for the same was available within our own institution, the students were open too for trials with some of the new technology, but further research was necessary to identify and encourage a range of skills in our students in order for them to get the best out of their online learning and as teachers to explore ways to ground the use of technology in sound pedagogy and not just adopting it for its own sake.

Research Questions

This paper takes the author's action research further and discusses the issues of applying the available technology to the delivery of a traditional module; evaluating both the tutor's and the students' experience and identifying the learning points for improving teaching practice.

 The main focus of this research was one module of a first year undergraduate FdA programme delivered during the first semester at a satellite campus. The programme is also delivered at three partner institutions. It was felt that the investigation should be restricted to the campus at the author's institution for ease of control, contingencies in case of software difficulties and the very nature of the research being experimental and therefore dynamic. Once the research is complete and fully evaluated, the new practice can be disseminated easily via the teaching team.

The trial of the technology for this stage of the research commenced October 2009 and is to be evaluated at the end of the first semester, February 2010

Methods

Action research continued to be considered the appropriate methodology for this research, Mellor (1998 cited in McNiff & Whitehead 2006) claims that:

> In action research the process itself is the methodology and is experimental, requiring a certain degree of entrepreneurialism as the practitioner will need to try multiple innovative ways until they find one that is suitable.

The reflective process continued through the reflective frames offered by Bourner (2003) and Bolman and Deal (1997).

The literature was used to gain a better understanding of the options and advice for applying technology and therefore initiate the experimental practice by the author and later for developing e-learning strategies to be shared across the teaching team. It began with ascertaining what blended learning was and was not. Bonk et al (2006) advise that it is embryonic and experimental, yet it takes place all the time and just because a first experience may not be a good one, does not mean it should be the only experience. They continue; "Great recipes are the product of generations of experimentation, tasting and refinement".

Frame

The findings will be analysed using the author's own reflection and evaluation of the delivery, evaluative feedback from the students provided and recorded individually using predetermined questions. A comparison will also be made of the examination results using last year's figures as a benchmark both in respect of the author's institution but also with the results from the partner institutions delivering the same programme, but not participating in this research to ascertain whether there are any significant differences.

Research findings

The action research focussed on the application of technology to learning thereby allowing the development of the author's teaching practice in respect of:

- o How to utilise the technology;
- o Developing an understanding of the pedagogy design required for this application;
- o How to develop Blended and E-learning strategies;
- o How to prepare students for using technology in their learning.

The intentions are to determine the limitations as well as the advantages of online learning and to develop appropriate strategies to support both teaching and learning opportunities.

The application chosen as a starting point was Camtasia Relay for producing E-Lectures. The decision for this arose from observations of and discussions with colleagues as to its capability as well as a desire, ascertained from the author's earlier action research, to facilitate alternative approaches to delivering theory, removing the reliance of the student on the tutor for all information instead empowering them to become independent learners.

Bonk et al (2006) cite in their Forward by Jay Cross (p xix), research undertaken by Capella University whose initiative was to ask "what face-to-face support is required to supplement online learning"? Given the decision already made, it seemed a good place to start.