2006

A technology-facilitated Learning Design Supporting Quality Assurance for Off-Campus and Off-Shore Course

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This paper describes a teaching approach that uses technology to support and encourage student learning in a first year university unit. At the same time, the technology provides a powerful support for quality assuring the delivery of the unit in off-campus mode and off-shore modes. The paper describes the online system and its supports for learning. It also discusses the opportunities that this and similar applications of technology can afford the quality-assurance processes associated with teaching.

Introduction

Most universities today recognise there are particular learning needs for first year students (eg. McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Students entering university courses often need to develop a number of skills and capabilities to achieve success. First year students come from a range of previous positions including school, the workplace and often unemployment. Students quickly need to be able to assume responsibility for their own learning, to undertake independent research and inquiry and to communicate and argue their ideas in a succinct fashion (Calder & Hanley, 2004).

To accommodate the particular needs of first year students in large unit, we have implemented an inquiry-based learning approach that is technology-facilitated. A number of studies into the first year experience of students have demonstrated a range of alternative delivery approaches that can be employed (eg. McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Contemporary learning designs and approaches to teaching, focus on student-centred modes of teaching, but many of these have proved difficult to use with large first year classes because of learners' limited self-regulated learning skills and the high overheads required to support such learners (eg. Ramsden, 1992; Laurillard, 2002). Inquiry-based learning is a popular form of student-centred learning that offers learning advantages in higher education. The approach provides meaningful contexts for learning which can encourage and support learner activity and engagement. It is often difficult to implement with large groups but technology can be used to address many of the problems (eg. Collis & Moonen, 2001). Our inquiry-based approach has been found to offer a number of learning opportunities for our students and unexpectedly, has also proven to be a boon for managing and coordinating the delivery of the unit in off-campus delivery modes.

Off-Shore and Off-Campus Delivery

There is a plethora of activity among Australian universities today in the delivery of off-campus and transnational programs. The activities are primarily aimed at broadening revenue generation and there are many reasons why international students need to receive a high quality education. In 2004 Australian universities enrolled more than 73,000 students offshore and it has been predicted that growth in the provision of offshore education in the next decade may surpass growth in onshore provision (DEST, 2004).

The delivery of units in off-campus locations can provide many problems for institutions in relation to quality assurance. Problems, both potentia and realised, include the performance, roles and responsibilities of offshore, tutors, inconsistency between onshore and offshore marking and grading

activities, the comparability of the students' learning experiences and in differing expectations among on and off-campus teachers. These problems are cited in quality assurance audits undertaken by universities of their off-campus programs and courses eg. Martin, 2003; Pyvis & Chapman, 2004.

Suggested strategies for dealing with these issues include the maintenance of continual links and connections between on and offshore personnel and careful moderation and monitoring of student output. Whilst institutions can struggle to establish processes and procedures that can support these activities, contemporary learning technologies appear to hold many prospects for dealing with such problems (eg. Kearsley, 2005). In recent years we have discovered some powerful supports for the quality assurance process being provided by the technology-facilitated approach we have been using. The following sections describe the computer-facilitated system we have developed to support teaching in our Communications degree and the features it employs to support high quality learning outcomes. It also describes how the system has been found to promote quality assurance processes in offshore teaching situations.

The Computer-based system

The technology-based system was designed to support student-centred modes of learning. It scaffolds a unit which is based around a series of problems/tasks which students complete on a weekly basis. Students' details are entered into the system in the classes in which they work. The system provides a means to receive student submissions, to facilitate teacher marking and feedback and provides an overall mechanism for coordinating and managing the large number of submissions and marks. Tutors are able to mark and grade the students in their classes as the work is submitted. The system is entirely scalable from single cohorts (eg. a single class of 20 students) to large cohorts (eg. 25 classes of 25 students).

The Web-based system supports the submission of problem solutions in the form of uploaded files. Each student has a private space into which he/she can upload submissions and view the marks and feedback provided for each. The use of a consistent set of marking criteria provides the means to streamline the online marking process. A tutor reviews the work submitted by a student and uses the criteria to provide a mark/grade. Based on the tutors' grades, the system calculates a mark and deducts penalties for lateness. A text box enables the tutor to provide feedback and comments on the grades given (Figure. 1).

Fig 1. The Tutor marking system

In the system, when a student logs in, he/she views a private page that shows the submissions that are required, provides the means to upload the necessary files, and shows the marks and grades allocated to completed works (Figure. 2). Since all submissions and feedback are computer-based, the system is able to be used by a coordinator to oversee all aspects of the submission process. The coordinator can quickly see which students have submitted their work, the marks awarded, and the feedback received. The coordinator can also view the tutors' marks and grades, can view the student work and quickly deal with any issues relating to marking, feedback and management. Student work is retained electronically and can be monitored for improvements, plagiarism etc. and retrieved at any time.

Fig 2. Student page showing feedback and marks.

Support for Quality Assurance

Our use of the system with off-campus and off-shore cohorts has provided my opportunities and advantages not originally intended when the system was designed and implemented, but which naturally come from such technology supported approaches.

We have used the system several times now with off-campus and off-shore cohorts and the system affords the coordinator such opportunities as:
- Being able to readily view student work samples and tutor marks and comments;
- An ability to view the level and scope of timely feedback students are receiving;
- An ability to seamlessly provide offshore tutors with work samples of local students as benchmarks for their marking process;
- Being able to monitor the standards of the offshore students so that proactive measures can be taken where problems appear to exist;
- Access to offshore students' work samples to enable cultural and institutional norms to be monitored and watched;
- Opportunities to share work samples between cohorts to explore cultural understandings and global issues.

Since the system has been implemented, we have been able to address a number of potential problems before they could have an adverse effect. These include:

- Occasional soft and hard marking practices by offshore tutors;
- Some cultural insensitivity in problems posed which, while well chosen for local students, appeared less successful with some offshore students;
- A lack of timely feedback being given to offshore students;
- Offshore tutors not applying ECU rules and assessment procedures consistently and accurately; and
- Questions concerning second language proficiency and implications for marking and assessment.

Summary and Conclusions

Technology applications as discussed in this paper have strong prospects for improving students' learning experiences through the provision of, and support for, active and engaging learning activities. The technology helps to move responsibility from the teacher to the student and many practitioners now attest to the opportunities and advantages of such approaches. But the opportunities appear not to stop at learning supports. As we have found, technology can also provide many opportunities for monitoring and maintaining standards and processes in teaching and learning in instances when units and programs are delivered beyond the brick walls of an institution. The benefits stem from the capacity of technology systems to record and store documents, to support and structure processes and systems and to provide seamless communications across great distances.

The system works well for us because the resources are maintained and served on local hardware that we manage and control. This creates a minimum of transactional distance in what can be a geographically distant operation (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The system works in our setting because there is some convergence between the teaching method and the subject, and there is strong infrastructure support required where the unit is taught. Whilst in other subjects, these conditions might not yet be available, current trends in ICT use in HE suggest that the opportunities are not too far from being accessible to other teachers and students in other units.

The advantages we have derived from the technology applications have stemmed from activities that were intended to support teaching outcomes alone. It is clear that with more purposeful design, it would be possible to create even more supportive and compelling contexts for quality assurance. As the higher education sector moves to adopt more deliberate quality assurance processes for external programs, and as technology infrastructure and capability grows, there will likely be opportunities for many more advantages than those described in this paper to be realised by those seeking to deliver quality programs in offshore locations.

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