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Teaching smarter with a blend of different learning experiences

Stuart Hirst

“Nothing we do at Leeds Met is more important than ensuring effective student learning. This Assessment, Learning and Teaching strategy proposes actions and targets to help us incorporate cutting-edge approaches to learning, teaching and assessment into a re-energised curriculum that fully meets our students’ needs.”
(Leeds Met Assessment, Learning and Teaching Strategy: 2005 - 2008 Executive summary)

At Leeds Met, the Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education have adopted the phrase, “Teaching Smarter”, to encompass an initiative intended to draw together good pedagogic practices in Assessment, Learning and Teaching and integrate them into the student learning experience. This needs to involve a fundamental rethink of the staff teaching and student learning experience, rebalancing assessment practices to improve formative assessment and feedback to students.

Although new technologies pervade modern life, this initiative is not driven by the need to adopt them. However, students are becoming familiar with tools of the Digital Age (podcasts, chat rooms, text messaging, blogging, googling, using web cams, wikis, e-Learning, etc.) and we must now consider how we can use these new learning spaces and blend them effectively with our use of face to face teaching. Use of appropriate digital resources has the potential to empower educators to greater integration of the components of assessment, learning and teaching.

Some might say that technology supported and e-Learning have no sound rationale and that they will fail to fulfil teaching and learning requirements. Equally, a face to face module could be “cobbled together” and this would be similarly doomed to failure. Many academics have found it difficult to blend e-Learning with their face to face teaching. As a result, the work has become an “overhead” and they have merely stored their Word handouts and PowerPoint lectures in, essentially, a digital filing cabinet. Why would students wish to access this except to retrieve materials they have missed due to poor attendance? We should take care that some of their praise is not for this reason!

Even at best, most current web based e-Learning support does not take advantage of the unique opportunities which it presents. Why would students engage in an on-line discussion if it is poorly integrated into the flow of teaching and learning? E-Learning environments have the potential to integrate a myriad of flexible (on-line) approaches and refocus our use of face to face interaction with students.

What are the factors likely to result in a position such as this? The e-Learning market is now beginning to mature. However, there must be a coherent, strategic and emphasized indication, from senior levels, of how it might be utilized to enhance the shared staff/student teaching/learning experience. Training should not be solely in the form of using the e-Learning technology tools but rather an exploration of the change in teaching approach

which might be necessary. Teaching staff need to learn about the potential benefits of how to utilise e-Learning but it should not be essential for them to be able to create their own e-Learning environment!

Some UK universities have embraced e-Learning as an appropriate component of their assessment, learning and teaching strategy. Edge Hill University has “SOLSTICE” (Supported Online Learning for Students using Technology for Information and Communication in their Education). They say:

“SOLSTICE is an innovative method of programme delivery that involves the use of online or blended learning to deliver programmes flexibly. The SOLSTICE method uses expertise in curriculum design and pedagogy, learning technology, application and deployment of multimedia and virtual learning environments, together with professional development for academic and learning support staff.”

Blending different learning experiences and being smarter about the approach adopted for teaching gives us new opportunities to rethink what it is we are trying to achieve. For a university which places students at the centre of its endeavours, constructive alignment of the curriculum is a process which we might do well to explore more closely. Constructive alignment is a term coined by John Biggs (Biggs, 1999) and is the underpinning concept behind the requirements for module specification, declarations of intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and the use of criterion based assessment. For blended learning to work within the university, there must be a process and mechanism which encourages (and supports) staff to rethink the blend (those components of a module which contribute to and satisfy the module learning outcomes), and which are adapted to address the areas which we believe crucial to successful student learning. The process of reassessing the extent to which a module is “constructively aligned” seems to be the very process needed to “break apart” a face to face delivered module and identify how it might best be delivered in a blended way. SOLSTICE, at first sight, seems to do a lot of this.

In essence, constructive alignment depends on two fundamental assumptions:

- Students construct meaning from what they do to learn.
- The teacher aligns the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes.

Legacy approaches to module development result in delivery often being a function of fitting syllabus materials into 12 weeks of lecture slots and associated tutorial time. Assignments might then be scheduled so as to provide students with summative assessment intervals but with relatively low integration into the flow of activity and little thought of how formative assessment might support student development. The benefit of the more holistic approach of curriculum alignment is that the module is designed so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes that are intended in the course. If an awareness of the different learning spaces and delivery patterns we have at our disposal were to be included there would be a better chance of ensuring that a blend including e-Learning does not result in a “bolt-on” addition. A more consistent approach would also mean that both students and academics might experience a more integrated approach to their modules and one which would place staff in the role of facilitator and ensure that students take more responsibility for their own learning.

Even in module teams, there is a danger that staff could be working in individual “silos” of activity unless there is a university lead on suggesting that e-Learning can be more than a supplement to the face to face student experience. With this paradigm shift in thinking, a new skills-set is also required to support integration of digital approaches to module delivery. Most academic staff will not possess these. They were originally employed for their subject knowledge and their ability to impart it to students not their web site development or multimedia skills!

So what is likely to be a suitable university environment to support this next generation (transformational) adoption of blended learning? Unless it implies a resource base which supports staff in web site development and multimedia skills, it will not result in any effective blend of on-line and face to face delivery and will, in the end, result in a “bolt-on” experience.

It is apparent that a university should be looking to do this in order to underpin the changes in Assessment, Learning and Teaching set out in their Assessment, Learning and Teaching strategy:

- to meet student expectations for online activity and interaction
- to offer students more choice and flexibility over how and when they study
- to improve engagement and retention
- and to achieve a move:

From	To
Experimental Use of e-Learning	Mainstream Use
e-Learning as an add-on to face-to-face teaching	the integration of e-Learning with face-to-face teaching
the conversion of offline pedagogy	the adoption of online pedagogy
e-Learning being seen as imposing a burden on administrators	e-Learning facilitating more effective and more efficient administration

These are strategic, steering group, decisions which must precede and inform any operational implementation with adequate lead times for ethos dissemination.

Most students are well ahead of staff in their use of technology. Thomas Friedman (Friedman, 2006) suggests that the skills for jobs in a world (where everything is becoming a “level playing field”) are those of:

- Collaborator
- Leverager
- Adapter
- Explainer
- Synthesizer
- Modeling Builder
- Localiser
- Personaliser
- Thinking across disciplines
- Ability to tell stories
- Building things with intelligence in them

- Creating networks
- Aggregating pieces horizontally
- Creativity

These skills are attributes of those who will work in an integrated world with its own “constructive alignment” (or equilibrium). Phil Race (Race, P. 2005) also suggests in his recent book that to teach smarter we need to:

Strive to enhance our students’ want to learn
 Help students to develop ownership of the need to learn
 Keep students learning by doing, practice, trial-and-error, repetition
 Ensure students get quick and useful feedback – from us and from each other
 Help students to make sense of what they learn

and identifies five factors for successful learning: “wanting” to learn; “needing” to learn; “learning by doing”; “feedback”; “digesting - making sense of what has been learned”. Phil Race’s well-known ‘ripples on a pond’ model of learning is not cyclical and is a close metaphor for the way in which blended learning might be organised.

Ultimately, no one size fits all and modules should not necessarily adopt the same blend of e-Learning and face to face teaching. However, it would be a shame if modules and students were unable to benefit due to deficiencies in support for staff that did not possess these skills. Smarter teaching also has counterparts in smarter administration and smarter management. Opportunities should be explored, which might now arise, for streamlining the tasks which detract from the ability to give rapid student (qualitative and quantitative) feedback in both formative and summative assessment. An unprejudiced assessment of how blended learning can be applied has the potential to reap tremendous reward and transform the shared staff/student experience.

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