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Creating a culture of co-construction

Jonathan Kennedy

Background

Skipton Girls' High School (SGHS) is a selective girls' grammar school for students aged 11 – 18. One of our main challenges is to add value to the students' learning experiences through skill development and the creation of leadership opportunities to help prepare them for the 21st century. At SGHS, the Humanities Faculty has undertaken a range of initiatives to facilitate enhanced student leadership of learning using our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Students today are 'digital natives' who have access to a wide variety of new technologies including MP3 players and mobile phones. They live in an age in which breaking news about key international events is disseminated first by individuals through file sharing sites such as Facebook and YouTube. The concept of Web 2.0, with its emphasis upon individuals using new technologies as a creative force rather than passively as consumers, is a reality in many of our students' lives.

This shift has a profound significance for teaching and learning as students increasingly expect to use new technologies creatively in school as well as at home. At SGHS, the VLE has become the driving force behind the development of a Year 9 Personalised Learning course in History which enables students to develop into 'lead learners'. These are students who take charge of their own learning and make a significant impact upon leading the learning of others. The Year 9 Personalised Learning course has developed lead learners by encouraging students to create their own personalised schemes of work, based upon their own choice of content and activity. The VLE has been central to these developments as it has enabled Assessment for Learning (AfL) material, learning resources, discussion forums and links to websites on a range of topics much broader than could ever be found in textbooks to be placed online in a package that can be accessed both in and out of school, thus transforming the learning environment.

Initial developments

Clearly such a transformation of learning did not take place overnight. The initial challenge faced by the History Department in the academic year 2005-06 was to heighten student engagement in homework tasks, which were sometimes perceived by students to be repetitive and of relatively little value to their learning. In order to unlock student potential in this area, the development of greater learner autonomy over activities was identified as the key. This would enable students to gain a greater sense of ownership of their work and thus, it was hoped, increase levels of achievement and motivation.

Members of the History Department drafted a Student Guide for Year 7 students. Initially this was a paper document which included a menu of learning activities from which students could choose a homework task. All students would gain an input into their learning by deciding upon their own homework tasks.

The introduction of the Student Guides had a significant impact upon student motivation and perceptions of learning. Learning questionnaires were completed by the 56 Year 7 students who trialled the Guides. The majority of these students perceived extension and homework activities to be always or mostly useful. 76% of students within this trial group saw such activities as beneficial to their learning, as indicated in their responses to the learning questionnaires.

Following the success of the Student Guide project, the History Department sought to apply principles of student choice to core in-lesson activities as well as homework tasks. The vehicle for this was the How2Cards. These were designed as short student-friendly guidance sheets which could be used to support the completion of a wide range of tasks by giving assessment criteria such as success criteria and student-friendly mark schemes. How2Cards were designed for a number of in-class learning activities including writing a story, designing a museum exhibition, creating a piece of art, reconstructing a monument or site, scripting a documentary, designing a virtual tour and planning a lesson for Year 6 students.

Year 9 Personalised Learning Course

The next step was to marry these initial developments to whole-school innovation in the use of new technologies and the VLE. In September 2008 the History Department developed a Personalised Learning Course for Year 9. This course was developed to complement SGHS' move towards an enhanced Key Stage 4, in which students completed the National Curriculum in History in Years 7 and 8 in order to further accelerate learning. This whole-school development enabled the History Department to create a course that was not tied to an external programme of study and that could afford even greater levels of creativity and challenge for students than the National Curriculum. It also enabled the earlier developments of Student Guides and How2Cards to be adapted and implemented in a more focused way within a clear programme of study. A key motive for the Year 9 Personalised Learning course was to facilitate greater student leadership of learning by allowing students to choose both the content they wished to study and how they wished to present their work.

A general theme of Ancient Civilisations was chosen for the course, with students able to choose their own aspect of this area from a structured option block, for example Egyptian warfare or Egyptian religion. An additional principle of the course was that there was an expectation that students should teach others about their topics. This started with peer teaching, but then moved on to students teaching Year 7s about their chosen theme. The key to ensuring the development of a coherent course which supported student learning was structure. As students were expected to work independently with the teacher in the role of facilitator, it was necessary to provide structured guidance in terms of clear success criteria and assessment material in order to build levels of confidence as students moved towards leading their own learning and that of others. This was provided by the school's VLE to which adapted How2Cards were uploaded. In effect, the VLE hosted the course and presented a coherent route through the learning experience. The VLE became a web-hosted Student Guide, with many of the earlier features of the guides being translated into a format more fitting for the 21st-century learner, including weblinks and forums. The VLE-hosted material enabled students to become lead learners by giving them the opportunity to post material on discussion forums, such as helpful hints and interesting facts which other students could access and apply to their own studies.

Co-construction of learning was at the core of this development. Learning is co-constructed through effective collaboration between students and teachers, for example through joint planning of lessons and schemes of work. The Year 9 Personalised Learning course promoted co-construction by enabling students to design their own scheme of work with the teacher acting in the role of facilitator, providing structured opportunities for independent work through the VLE. By freeing up content, we allowed students to create their own learning route and tailor it to their personal learning preferences. By empowering students as teachers or lead learners, the course broke down the perception that members of staff were the main source of information in the classroom and this led to a shared responsibility for learning and knowledge acquisition. Students developed leadership skills as they were given responsibility for teaching younger students.

Online discussion forums enabled students to reflect upon their learning and pass on advice to other students. One forum encouraged students to post advice to others, such as: "Try to choose something achievable, don't pick something random and end up trying to do the impossible". Students also posted weblinks and facts which enabled them to share their knowledge with others, moving away from reliance on the class teacher. 63% of the students participating in the course posted on one of the forums on the VLE. Such developments helped to create the feel of a blog.

The impact of this Personalised Learning course was evident at many levels. In terms of Year 9 option choices, 46% of students chose to study GCSE History, which suggested a high degree of satisfaction, and engagement, with the Personalised Learning course they had studied over the course of the year. This was supported by an analysis of end-of-course learning questionnaires which indicated that many students had enjoyed the course and recognised that they had significant control over their own learning. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high) the average score from a sample of one teaching group of 28 students recorded in the end-of-course questionnaires was 4.2 for the question "How in control of your learning do you feel?" and 4.0 for "How much did you enjoy the course?". Several students who often presented challenges to staff owing to their behaviour and attitudes to learning found the course enjoyable and as a result more easily engaged in their learning.

Conclusion

The Year 9 Personalised Learning Course enabled genuine deep learning to take place as students completed structured activities with a significant degree of autonomy that allowed them to develop transferable skills of leadership, research, evaluation and analysis. Students developed not only as learners, but lead learners responsible for creating their own understanding of the past and disseminating it to others.

Through the developments outlined in this paper, a model has been developed in which the voices of all students can be heard in the curriculum through the choices that they make in their learning and their feedback and evaluations through the forums. As outlined here, student leadership can also drive innovation in other areas such as personalised learning, Assessment for Learning and the use of new technologies. Traditional paper-based Student Guides were the start of a journey at Skipton Girls' High School History Department which has culminated in students leading and co-constructing learning through the vehicle of the VLE. Other faculties at SGHS are now developing further opportunities for co-construction. It has been a long journey, but a worthwhile one, with exciting future developments ahead such as applying the innovations outlined to Key Stage 4 and beyond.

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