
Citation:

Munyangeyo, T (2009) Enhancing learner engagement in e-learning provision. *Assessment, Teaching and Learning Journal*, 7. 10 - 13. ISSN 1756-8781

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Enhancing learner engagement in e-learning provision

Théophile Munyangeyo

Introduction

Many theorists and practitioners in education (Atherton, 2009; Costello, 2003; Tomal, 2003) argue that reflection as it relates to our own teaching practice is profoundly part of the foundation of purposeful learning. Questioning our routine allows us to ask ourselves what really does and does not work when we seek to meet learners' needs. Reflecting on what we do leads to the evaluation of the effectiveness of our teaching practice, the re-examination of our teaching approaches from the perspective of the learner and basing our professional decisions upon feedback from learners and/or colleagues.

By examining the current e-learning provision in languages at Leeds Metropolitan University, this study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions and students' attitudes and preferences towards good practice in e-learning. This article reflects on the results of a survey of the Languages Subject Group's e-learning activities and delivery, which was conducted from November 2008 to April 2009.

The survey sought to enhance the understanding of good practice in e-learning provision and barriers that might hinder the effective delivery of web-based learning materials, from both the learner's and the teacher's point of view. Although preferences, in this respect, may change over time, making any step to understand the determinants of learners' engagement in e-learning could challenge some assumptions on the effectiveness of teaching and learning approaches.

Improving the learner's engagement

The assumption that teachers' own preferred learning styles tend to affect the ways in which they teach has been highlighted by numerous pedagogical critics (Kain, 2003; Moore, 2004; Schuh, 2004). In *Differentiated instructional strategies: one size doesn't fit all*, Gregory and Chapman (2007) eloquently assert that this one-size-fits-all model is currently outmoded alongside new approaches that recognise individual differences. Other researchers (Brown, 2003; Hart, 2003; Pillay, 2002; Weimer, 2002) argue that 21st-century curricula challenge traditional teacher-centred methodologies "to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students and make the required increases in achievement gains [...]. With teacher educators, problems occur when teaching styles conflict with students' learning styles, often resulting in limited learning or no learning" (Brown, 2003).

In the current technology-oriented society, many teachers have responded to this conceptual shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred curriculum by creating huge e-learning materials with an assumption that uploading them onto e-learning platforms would be good practice in embedding information technology into independent learning practice. Although some designers and advocates of e-learning platforms state that "effective and engaging e-learning materials can go a long way to meeting the accessibility needs of different learners [and offer] many distinct advantages over traditional paper based resources" (JISC, 2009), a simplistic display of information on the platforms seems to turn online sources into traditional printouts. This survey seeks to examine the teachers' and learners' perceptions of the current e-learning approaches in languages and explore new strategies that would foster curriculum developments to enhance the learner's engagement.

Methodology

In order to assess the impact of the e-learning resources and provision in languages at Leeds Metropolitan University, a small-scale research project involving eight members of staff and 32 students from French and Spanish language courses was carried out. They completed a questionnaire divided into six sections: core e-learning skills and good practice, online assessment, supporting students off-campus (distance learning), preferred e-learning materials, the most valuable form of e-learning and 15 open questions on learning resources and delivery of materials. This aimed to allow the researcher to gain more insight into the issues surrounding the effectiveness of e-learning provision and the application of technology, namely the relationship between staff skills, student skills, curriculum design and access to engaging resources. One of the general objectives of this survey was to generate summative scales that would allow the researcher to evaluate the respondents' level of agreement to a statement. As the survey was qualitative in nature, it also sought to highlight similarities and discrepancies underlined by the learners' and teachers' preferences in e-learning delivery approaches.

Learner and teacher perceptions of the e-learning provision in Languages

While both students and staff recognised in this survey that there is a need to create a variety of engaging e-learning resources to widen subject knowledge and enhance language skills development, there were discrepancies between learner and teacher perceptions of barriers to the effective use of e-learning. 78% of teachers believed that neither poor delivery nor poor resources are the key factors that undermine effective e-learning provision. Instead, they felt that efforts to implement e-learning strategies in Languages were hampered by the lack of availability of technology enhanced learning materials, and above all by lack of time (which may be related) (Figure1). Furthermore, only 30% of teachers perceived poor delivery of computer-assisted learning resources to be the major barrier. However, as the lowest percentage (45%) of student responses cited poor resources as barriers to the use of e-learning, it would seem that students believe that the institutional e-learning platform is actually full of valuable materials (Figure 2). 88% of students believed that the delivery methods in fact constituted the greatest hindrance to learner engagement.

Figure 1: Barriers to the use of e-learning (staff)

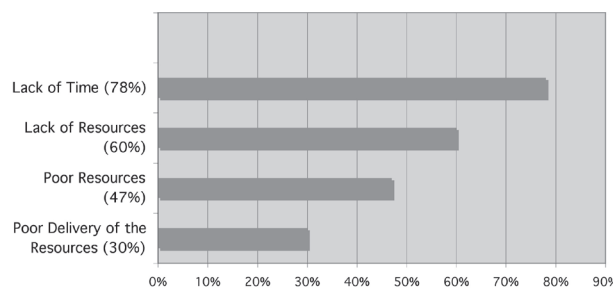
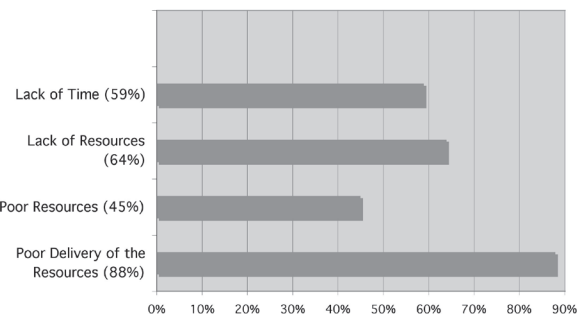


Figure 2: Barriers to the use of e-learning (students)



Multiple answers were possible

Overall, students are keen to access e-learning materials that accommodate individuality. Some of them expressed their concerns that the current e-learning provision doesn't give them "access to native speaker" fluency in the form of a forum. Others said it does not "offer the flexibility to navigate around the site" and "does not enhance the development of all major language skills", such as reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Nevertheless, many learners were generally most positive about using e-learning resources where, in some language modules, they accessed interactive resources that widened their subject knowledge and provided them with alternative examples or explanations to those from classroom settings. They felt that this provided continuous formative assessment opportunities, allowed them to test their progress and enhanced their engagement. In this respect Weimer (2002) is right when he writes that "if students are engaged, involved and connected with a course, they are motivated to work harder in that course". If many students feel that variety is key to enhance interest in learning, any web-based learning strategy that does not foster this variety is not e-learning but rather e-teaching. While e-learning relates to enhancing the active participation of students in content knowledge building and skills development (Rosenberg, 2001), e-teaching denotes displaying electronic materials with limited engaging and collaborative activities. In this respect, although there are some critics like Harris (2008) who prefer e-teaching over e-learning when he states that "e-learning lowers the bar for teaching by assuming that students teach themselves", students who took part in the survey considered e-teaching to be an approach that turned electronic platforms into libraries which learners could turn to whenever they needed missed or extra handouts.

Another discrepancy that was highlighted by the survey is that the highest score (68%) of teachers' perceptions of the best way of supporting students off-campus was given to "uploading teaching materials onto the e-learning platform as a good method of e-learning delivery". Only 38% cited "using forums" as the best method of e-learning delivery, and yet student responses suggested that forums were one of their preferred methods for improving communication skills.

Nevertheless, given the students' responses, there is evidence that the advent of technology enhanced learning has had a considerable impact on teaching and learning. Many students believe that although a variety of multi-levelled resources should be made more available, there is no doubt that e-learning is an excellent opportunity that offers learning at their own pace. While some staff were worried about the fact that "students may get the impression that e-learning can replace a classroom", there is a consensus among students that "nothing can replace the teacher", because they believe that "the classroom interaction leads to in-depth study". When students were asked to determine the form of e-learning that they valued most, mixed mode e-learning scored high to the detriment of web-dependent e-learning. This approach ensures that e-learning delivery is not overly dependent on technology, yet sufficient to match students' expectations by catering to their skills level and ability in all key language areas.

Conclusion

It seems clear from this survey that the learner-centred approach in e-learning has to be developed further in Languages before any discrepancy between learner and teacher perceptions of good practice can completely disappear. There is a need for a more standardised modular structure, the development of multi-levelled tasks to meet the learners' mixed ability needs and a well-established e-learning strategy that reflects pedagogical approaches in planning and delivery of e-learning.

Because students' comments were available for everyone to read within the Languages Subject Group, the results of this survey have been discussed among teaching staff to inform their continuing professional development and the periodic review of the e-learning strategies. There is now a genuine commitment to improve the structural manner in which e-learning materials are presented for easy navigation and information retrieval. More e-learning materials will offer opportunities for learners' self-assessment at all levels of study to allow them to acknowledge their attainment and to record their progress in all key language learning skills. The aims of using e-learning will be made clearer through the planning of the modular learning objectives.

Owing to the small sample size of this survey, further research using larger samples needs to be carried out using observational research approaches and interviews through focus groups to investigate other variables that may influence e-learning delivery to enhance learner engagement.

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