

University of Highlands and Islands at Perth College

Title: Promoting critical thinking and reflection through collaborative learning

Background

Perth College is one of Scotland's leading providers of further and higher education, offering a range of learning opportunities from one-day courses to degrees. As a member of the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) Millennium Institute, the College also works with partner institutions and a network of learning centres to bring learning to rural communities across Perthshire and Kinross.

Challenge

One such course is the BA in Child and Youth Studies, which is run by Perth College in conjunction with a number of UHI partner colleges. The programme prepares learners for working with children in a range of education, pre-school, health and care settings.

Given the wide appeal of this course, learners are attracted from across a wide geographical region in which the learner population is dispersed in a number of remote locations. These learners also tend to be from diverse backgrounds and have a range of family or work pressures which influence their approach to learning. As a result of these pressures, most learners enrolled on this course elect to study mainly from home.

Despite the support infrastructure provided through partner colleges and resident student advisors in regional learning centres, the level of face-to-face contact between learners, their peers and tutors tends to be relatively low. For such learners, e-learning can offer a range of new learning opportunities. However, in order to be effective, the online provision needs to be properly focussed.

What e-learning offers

Jon Clarke is course leader at Perth College. He sees the online component of the course as a means of engaging learners in discussion and collaboration. This model suits many learners in the region for practical reasons, but also serves to maximise high order learning. This is facilitated by providing resources such as lecture notes, papers for critique, learning objects and bespoke materials through a virtual learning environment (*WebCT*), which are used as the basis for collaborative discussions.

By using a text-based medium for asynchronous discussion, learners have the opportunity to reflect on both the contributions of other learners and their own ideas before sharing. This constructivist approach to learning is aimed at promoting experiential and reflective learning and is underpinned by educational models including Kolb's experiential learning and Schon's "reflection in action"¹.

An innovative aspect of this approach is to link these collaborative activities with assessment. For each topic, learners are required to make at least three contributions to the discussion each week, one of which must be substantive. With 25% of module marks available being assigned to their contributions, learners take the discussions seriously. This has significantly raised the level of discussion, and feedback indicates that this has had a positive effect on their learning.

With such a geographically dispersed body of learners, technology also offers real benefits for other types of communication. For example, live chat sessions based around tutorials allow isolated learners to talk in real time to tutors and other

learners. Social interaction is also encouraged through an online 'student common room' and 'cyber café'.

Benefits for learners

A key benefit of e-learning for learners on this course has been the increased flexibility in the approaches they can take to learning. For example, although learner Irene Sinclair has always sought to gain a degree, the commitment of raising a family has deterred her from enrolling in traditional courses. E-learning has allowed her study to fit in with her lifestyle.

The emphasis on collaboration also appears to have had a strong influence on individual learning. Alison Falconer has found the level of discussion with her fellow learners has increased during the course. For Alison this demonstrates a clear impact on learning, adding "the pace of discussion rises as student learning increases". This type of engagement would be difficult to achieve with remote learners through content-delivery alone.

The use of online collaboration tools may also have had a wider impact. Many learners felt that this approach represents the way forward for dispersed learning communities, not just for learning, but for other aspects of everyday life. The experience they gained would therefore prove valuable in the future.

Key points for effective practice

It is important to select an appropriate tool for each teaching and learning activity. On this course, real-time chat has worked well for scheduled tutorials with small groups of learners. However, this would not be appropriate as the primary collaboration tool for learners studying at different times. In this context, discussion boards, being asynchronous, work more effectively. They also allow learners the time to reflect on the discussion before contributing.

Tutor, Colin Docherty, believes that tutors need to monitor the progress of discussions and intervene where required, just as in the classroom. For example, by posting appropriate questions to stimulate and maintain the discussion, amplifying the salient points made by learners and bringing in new topics and outside materials.

As this can be time-consuming for the tutor, the response times outlined to learners need to be manageable. Rather than promise a level of tutor interaction which cannot be sustained, it is better to agree realistic timescales which can be met.

Tutors also need to establish clear rules for how learners should use discussions - and enforce them. Including simple guidelines, such as avoiding writing in capitals (which is perceived as SHOUTING) and acknowledging before posting a differing opinion, can have a surprising impact on the success of online discussions.

Barriers

With most course activities occurring online, some learners could be disadvantaged if they lack the necessary ICT skills. To address this, all learners enrolling on the programme undergo a diagnostic assessment of their ICT skills and are provided with the training required to enable participation.

As in the classroom, some learners may be reluctant to contribute to online discussions. Whilst assessing contributions to discussions may motivate such learners, this can be perceived negatively. It can also be a time-consuming and difficult task for tutors to evaluate large numbers of contributions.

Final word

For Jon Clarke, the guiding principle has been to "start with questions about what students need". In this case, the answer was an online component that is both pedagogically sound and practical.

Further details

Jon Clarke is happy to discuss this work and can be contacted via email at:

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¹ Kolb, D. A. and Fry, R. (1975) Toward an applied theory of experiential learning, in C. Cooper (ed.) *Theories of Group Process*, London: John Wiley.

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*, New York: Basic Books