

22. Managing online learning

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on some of the key issues in the design and delivery of online modules. Any intervention in general, and pedagogic ones in particular, must be theory-informed/evidence-based and practice relevant. There are many ways to think about the role of theory in the design, development and delivery of online Higher Education courses and one has to consider the relationship between pedagogy and technology. Ideally, pedagogy should lead technology. However, technology sets the parameters, enabling and constraining in computer-mediated learning (both human and technology aspects). I use the transformation model, which is often applied to operations and performance management, as an organising framework for discussing the implications of this to design, delivery and evaluation of an online module. While this chapter has been authored, having in mind the modules that I teach, which are centred around the topics of entrepreneurship, strategy and change management, the issues discussed here are generic to online modules/programmes.

ONLINE LEARNING AS A TRANSFORMATION SYSTEM

The principles of constructivist learning environments hold that module/programme design and delivery should support active learning systematically and draw on cognitive and social learning theory. Considering online learning from a constructivist perspective has implications for the design, development and delivery of online education.

PROCESS

In line with the tenets of knowledge constructivism, my learning activities are aimed at stimulating and enhancing conceptual interrelatedness, interdisciplinary learning, and multiple perspectives, granting learners control of their learning to an appropriate level. To this effect, real-world examples/live cases and exploration, scaffolding, experiential learning/self-reflection are used in individual work modes as well as group-based work that promotes cooperation and social negotiation, aiming predominantly at higher-order learning.

A case in point is the online postgraduate module 'Strategy, Change and Leadership'. The module involves a mixture of learning methods, with a view to engage learners synchronously and asynchronously. These include instruction, demonstration, case studies, individual/group work and a range of practical skills and activities. An element of self-directed study underpins such activities, which link to the assessment and attainment of the specified intended learning outcomes. Different types of media are used to help create new ways to exchange diverse experiences and perspectives for collaborative learning. Indicatively, the following means are used: podcasts, giving the highlights of a lecture, video interviews of practitioners demonstrating problems and solutions, and storyboard templates, which show how a concept/framework of change can be applied to practice. Webinars and online synchronous discussions often entail learning activities involving problem-based work individually and collaboratively. Discussion boards, group email and wikis enable asynchronous interaction and are often used to enrich the learning experience. Moreover, the use of reflective learning and personal development planning are central to the achievement of the learning outcomes and the effective development of learners.

Moreover, courseware usability is a crucial element in the process of online learning. The design of the course/module interface is critically important because it has a positive or negative impact on user performance. Concerning the latter point, one has to take into account that learners are sensitive to the readability of onscreen text.

Teaching Tip

Use screen-friendly fonts and web-safe colours in order to create a standard consistent look.

Studying long texts from the screen is not easy and people do not like to go more than three clicks far from the main page. I usually suggest a navigation frame to online learners and employ strategies for cognitive error

recognition, diagnosis and recovery (e.g. providing feedback and direction through appropriate communication).

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN ONLINE LEARNING

With web 2.0 technologies and the growth of different types of offshore courses, opportunities for new types of learning are provided, dismantling traditional boundaries. These technologies allow individuals to connect in real time to others anywhere in the world, as higher education institutions use multiple technologies to facilitate, complement and support international experience and intercultural connections. As Higher Education is increasingly able to supersede geographic boundaries, colleagues and classmates may very well be on the other side of the world. Importantly, technology has made international experience much more accessible to students unable to study abroad because of limited financial resources or time. As a result of the expansion of online learning courses there is now a wealth of information available about online learning and virtual learning environments (VLE) and elements of effective practice.

The online education process should engage participants, create for them a sense of common space and identity and stimulate their active learning. To achieve this, my online modules are designed and delivered with a view to enable learners to:

- Participate in interactive modes of instruction, synchronously and asynchronously
- Engage with authentic/near-authentic activities and multidisciplinary tasks
- Work collaboratively in a heterogeneous group
- Progress through exploration and reflection to achieve higher-order learning
- Maximise the benefits of facilitation provided by the lecturer and the tutors.

In essence, I sense that the lecturer/tutors should be acknowledging and supporting participation, assessing student learning, providing feedback and guiding students. However, while online education can be empowering, where courses are taught wholly online there can be additional challenges for building teaching relationships and motivating students. These challenges stem from the diversity of the student body and the disparities in terms of *geography, national culture, age, skills, experience,*

Table 22.1 *Amplifications and reductions in online learning*

Themes	Example of amplification	Example of reduction
Flexibility, convenience	Removal of temporal, geographical and situational barriers. Students stay in their own homes and communities. Their private lives remain unchanged and a first priority.	When students' private lives remain a priority, learning becomes a second priority. Coursework is subordinated to immediate responsibilities and both students and instructors may experience a loss of sense of belongingness.
Course design	Online learning technology can increase the quality of course design and cost effectiveness.	A text-based asynchronous learning environment can result in loss of teachable moment, campus culture and teaching as a scholarly activity.
Equity, equality	As physical and cultural characteristics are not visible, there is a more equal and equitable platform for communicating.	Because physical and cultural characteristics are not visible, students are not forced to confront their biases and prejudices.
Thinking, learning skills	Technology is a catalyst for more interactive and meaningful activities that facilitate higher-order learning.	Text-based discussions do not develop verbal skills.

Source: Adapted from Kanuka and Rourke (2008).

situational factors (e.g. work/family commitments) and motivations with taking up and exploring online technologies. Kanuka and Rourke (2008), in exploring amplifications and reductions associated with online learning, point out the main advantages and disadvantages that should be taken into account when designing and delivering online courses. These are summarised above in Table 22.1.

Problems related to online intercultural learning in HE focus primarily on two interrelated issues: (a) online learning, which frequently requires new ways of interacting and collaborating with others; and (b) intercultural learning, which may include learners and instructors with differing worldviews, communication practices and technological issues. Studies commonly refer to mismatches between learning and teaching cultures, language, assessment difficulties, disciplinary differences and social presence. Hence, while collaborative learning is a very significant pedagogical approach, lending itself to shared experiences and novel ideas for lecturers/

tutors and students alike, it presents additional challenges in an online context.

In line with relevant literature, local English-speaking students tend to report greater satisfaction with online learning than international students. There is little doubt that the international dimension of online learning and the cultural diversity involved in communications relating to online courses posit severe challenges. Students can find it difficult to make positive connections with students from other cultural backgrounds online. Although this echoes much of the literature pointing to difficulties in communication in face-to-face courses, while cultural differences are not unique to online courses (which tend to have a very diverse/international student body), they generally tend to be much more pronounced and more difficult to address without face-to-face interaction. On this note, cultural and institutional differences are difficult to accommodate in the design and delivery. For instance, enterprising and strategising approaches may differ in different countries and people have different ideas about what a good leader – one who brings about successful change initiatives – looks and acts like.

Using multimedia and asynchronous communication can help create new ways for students to exchange their diverse experiences and perspectives for mutual learning. Also, some international students report that online environments can give them the time and the ‘safe space’ they need to formulate their responses and the more ‘anonymous’ context can be less intimidating. However, others say that they can feel intimidated by the longer and more articulate posts of local students. Moreover, although synchronous learning can be enabled by various means, such as webinars, online forums, discussion boards, chat and tutoring, different time zones can pose a challenge.

Teaching Tip

To accommodate those with less certainty about their posts in an online discussion forum consider setting a word limit for posts.

EXPLOITING OPPORTUNITIES AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Which Way is Up?

Considering relevant literature there are, in my experience, certain elements of good practice that could help address these challenges effectively and in some cases turn them into opportunities for inclusive, active online learning. These are outlined below:

- Monitoring the levels of student participation and providing encouragement or prompts when necessary. Careful moderation of online posts and discussions can encourage ‘risk taking’ by students who may feel less confident about their language skills through positive responses to their contributions and the inclusion of their contributions in the main discussions.
- Although all communication about the module must be posted online, students should have the option of contacting the tutor by email for more individual issues or matters of a personal nature.
- Providing information about support available for developing writing and online participation skills.
- Expectations around requirements and online behaviour should be outlined in a welcome email or post from the tutor and through careful and sensitive intervention by the tutor when necessary. Modelling respectful forms of dialogue and participation and making explicit rules of online group work is important. For instance, the use of greetings, the formality/informality of postings, the levels of personal disclosure, rules about avoiding slang and idioms, expectations about the speed of responses, expectations about whether, and how often, the lecturer or tutor will post comments. Addressing any inappropriate or discriminatory language or responses immediately is of paramount importance.
- Internationalising the curriculum can help create a more inclusive online group working. This involves providing students with global perspectives of their discipline, enabling them to develop a set of values and skills to operate in diverse cultural environments (often labelled ‘intercultural competencies’) and considering how professional practice differs in different cultures/countries.
- Providing opportunities for students to identify and post relevant sources of information or examples from their own cultural settings. Posts can include a variety of resources including pictures, videos, media stories, articles, as well as links to other websites. This will allow them to make connections between what they know and what they are learning.
- Posting weekly messages summarising the content for the course to date or for that week pointing to what students will have been expected to learn. This can help students understand the bigger picture and the development of their learning which can also help to maintain their motivation and feelings of inclusion.
- Requesting students to provide their own short summaries of readings, of their thinking or their own findings, and ‘eureka’ moments to increase motivation and collaborative learning.

ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

As mentioned above, an online module should engage students in real time and asynchronously such that they address the right level of knowledge, usability and aesthetics. Indicatively, the following means could be used:

- Podcasts – giving the highlights of a lecture
- Video interviews of practitioners demonstrating problems and solutions/tips
- Learning tools using a Storyboard template – showing how a theory can be applied to practice – linking with video interviews.

Using synchronous and asynchronous collaboration tools is vital for effective online learning. Such tools are central to ensuring collaboration within online problem-based learning teams and include chat, discussion boards, video conferencing, group browsing and discussion group email. The use of bulletin boards, where Q&A/Solutions are posted, and wikis for asynchronous group interaction can enrich the students' learning experience. Other methods, individual or group-based, include webinars where learners can ask questions and receive answers and online consultancy sessions over a specified time. As mentioned, the tutor's presence is crucial for creating a sense of an inclusive, active learning space. To stimulate participation, the tutor must not take for granted that social interaction will automatically take place just because the environment makes it technologically possible. In that respect, it is important not to restrict social interaction to task-specific activities aiming at cognitive processes. Interventions aimed at socio-emotional and affective processes must not be ignored, neglected or forgotten, as these seem to make a crucial difference.

CONCLUSION

Finally, I endeavour to not lose sight of the aim of learner-centred design: know how learners prefer to learn, understand their motivation or incentive to engage in online learning, what their needs are and how they feel comfortable when using online applications. Needless to say it is important to know what the users' experiences with online learning are. Therefore, the need for evaluating regularly the online learning system and identifying pedagogical and technological areas for improvement is imperative.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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