

GETTING ONLINE - PROCESS OR PRODUCT?

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Summary

Including an online component in an existing simulation-based undergraduate subject produced some surprising outcomes. The subject is the capstone unit, presented as a simulation of organisational behaviour, providing an opportunity to review program content and develop individual ways of integrating knowledge into practice. Two student groups had parallel encounters with quite different experience and outcomes. Behaviours apparently influenced by perceptions of learned helplessness and exhibited as learning anxieties intruded on the experience to an unexpected extent. Introducing online learning to mature age students in their final year of undergraduate study did not, at first glance, seem to be a major challenge. All those involved were in adult education roles in their workplaces and were supposedly aware of the rate of social change and associated usage of electronic media.. This article reports on issues of significance for academics considering developing their material for online delivery

Introduction

The learning reported here occurred in the capstone subject in the Bachelor Education in Adult Education (B.Ed Adult Education) at the Faculty of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Known as 'XB' (for eXperience Based Learning, Putzel, 1996), and is designed as an 'organisation in the classroom' - an extended simulation introducing theories of human behaviour in workplaces. In 1998 the subject incorporated a web-based platform as an essential part of the learning and assessment process. Participants were mature-age students, ranging in age from 25 to 55. The experience revealed some surprising facts about such students and raised issues for further consideration in ensuring a closer fit of technology, learning process and content.

Two particular classes had quite different experiences arising from a number of factors including attendance patterns, group size and particular skill sets available within each class. A comparison of their experiences is used here to illustrate the 'lessons learned' from the experience of introducing online learning to adult learners.

Issues Emerging

As a simulation, "XB" is unlike the more traditional modes of delivery encountered in earlier semesters and often brought unexpected issues to the surface. Receptive participants identified the issues as key learning outcomes. Resistance was most evident in participants who seemed unable to resolve emotional responses arising from learning anxiety. members of the latter were less able to distinguish among problems rising from technical problems, subject learning processes and theoretical content.

Issues that emerged from an analysis of the entire experience included: · subject content became subservient to the task of acquiring skills tangential to theory; · learning anxiety was an unexpectedly strong factor. Despite participants' intellectual awareness of the concept, it was - at times - an almost overwhelming influence on learning capabilities, indicating an inability to distinguish between subject content, technical systems and learning processes; · problems of access to suitable resources (Internet links and even computers) interfered with the learning to a greater degree than anticipated - and remains a matter of concern for the future; and · acquisition of technical skills and related knowledge, involved time commitments well beyond that expected to occur within traditional staff/student interactions.

The Students

Students were all work-based trainers, a distinct organisational role established during the 1970's, when theories of learning focused on childhood as the time when learning was happening. At that time Australians becoming work-based trainers frequently did so by accident, receiving little teaching preparation beyond acknowledgment as content knowledge experts and/or attending 'train the trainer' courses. This mode of entry into the role implicitly located the 'trainer' as 'expert' and the learner as 'novice' to be imprinted with organisationally desirable skills and behaviours.

However, Knowles (1975), Kolb et al (1971) and others, were developing theories to address real and suspected differences between 'adults' and 'children' as learners and were altering understanding of how to conduct adult education programs.

At the beginning of the 21st century competency-based strategies for workplace skill development are based on this work. Training (also called Human Resource Development - HRD) is now a formal career option, rather than an accidental one, with a well structured range of professional skills.

The Course of Study

The Bachelor of Education Adult Education at UTS was created to meet the demand for continuing professional development for trainers. The course requires that students test and reconcile educational theory within their workplace practice. It draws extensively on adult learning principles and espouses a practical and workplace based approach to knowledge and skill development.

Students are encouraged to develop their ability to critique research literature, research their own practice and be self-critically aware of how their practice remains relevant and suitable to evolving workplace contexts.

The Subject

By providing a final review of acquired learning, through use of problem-based learning, 'XB', encourages critical re-assessment of personal practice. An 'XB' room replicates organisational structures to provide insight into the value of having both a 'big picture' focus, and parallel awareness of ways personal actions impact on that 'big picture'. Students design and present sessions demonstrating their understanding of specific components of subject and course content, while simultaneously responsible for assessing their own - and each other's - learning. One sub-group is required to teach everyone about communication skills, including computer mediated communication. This unit was activated for the first time in 1998 following the arrival of TopClass, a platform deemed appropriate to the needs of the subject and selected by the Institute for Interactive Multimedia (IIM) at UTS after a review of web-based learning options.

Aside from optional elective subjects, this was at the time the only contact that students had with technology-based learning at UTS. I had to learn how to use TopClass prior to introducing it, and hindsight suggests that I needed much greater knowledge about the use of technology-based media - well beyond what I gained in relation to this specific platform. My decision to use TopClass brought with it a direct and at times, disconcertingly first-hand experience, of the unknown and of the discomforting effect of 'learning on the run' much as was subsequently encountered by the students. My own learning was extensive and has informed subsequent skill development and other activities in computer-aided instruction.

Case Studies

The two groups, described here, were similar only in participants' backgrounds and prior learning experiences. Their different locations and attendance patterns created differences in response to the subject learning mode, and its technically advanced components, that were not anticipated.

Group 'G' met four times a semester at the off-campus workplace of several class members. Time constraints led to the introduction of TopClass protocols at the first meeting, rather than (as intended, and as happened in Group 'M') introducing it as the responsibility of a self-selected student group. Although TopClass had seemed particularly suitable for supporting their communication between on-site meetings, the group did not ever become comfortable with the concept. The technical reasons for providing early access to TopClass were substantial, however subsequent events and reactions suggest it was not a good choice of action.

Group 'M' met weekly at UTS close to campus-based computing facilities. However, session hours were 7pm to 8.30pm, after participants had already had a full day's work and a prior academic class. It was anticipated that the facilities could be used for the initial training sessions designed and presented by the students with further online work being done at home or work. This did eventuate, but levels of knowledge were so variable that the task was much greater than anticipated.

Actual Problems Encountered

Individual capabilities - When preparing to introduce TopClass, I was advised that sixty to eighty percent of UTS students had reasonable computing skills and access to relevant facilities. Such data was not available for particular student groups! It is now known that the data should be (at least) reversed for the two classes in question. A salutary warning of the dangers of relying on generalised 'statistics'!

Internet services at the off-campus site were provided by an employer other than the site owner. Although most students were involved in the same work, access was limited to employees of the provider. This was totally unexpected and excluded most class members, thus blocking the key means of access. Other participants, in both groups, had Internet access at work, but felt constrained from using it for study purposes because of various internal edicts and had no at-home access. Barely a third of all students had email access and a surprising number had only basic computing skills and a large number had never used the Internet. UTS provides computer labs and web-based library access which might seem attractive to students working full time and only able to study at night, however on-campus facilities were generally ignored. While the computer literate found the process straightforward, the remainder found it complex and difficult, despite assessment of TopClass as a 'user-friendly' application. One student with extensive experience produced a guidebook which greatly enhanced the extent to which her class ('M') took up the technology.

Technophobia seems an odd condition for adults used to teaching about their area of expertise, yet it emerged as a strong inhibiting factor for many otherwise competent adults

The off-campus participants became stalled in their early efforts to get online, and felt unable to resolve their difficulties. "XB" advises that: "within certain limits we don't care what happens because we can learn from it. Our experiences test theories and tools . . . You are invited to become a manager of your life if nothing else. [and] to take responsibility for making things turn out the way you want them to . . . and to understand the hows and whys of organisational life." (Putzel, 1996:1) However Schein, (1999) points out that while learning anxiety remains high, most individuals are motivated to ". . . invent various excuses for being unable to engage in transformative learning processes . . ." They will maintain that they 'can do so' and then assert this is 'not the right time/place/context, etc' thus re-locating responsibility for their unease onto external factor outside themselves, and maintaining ignorance of their internal emotional state. According to Schein these responses come in stages similar to those identified by Kubler-Ross (1997) in her work on grief, and called by him- i) Denial, ii) Scapegoating, and Dodging, iii) Manoeuvring and Bargaining.

All these behaviours were observed in those discomfited by the process, and attempts to emphasise self-management and personal responsibility were frequently unsuccessful. Langer's (1993) work on 'Mindfulness' identifies ways in which habit and routine inhibit effective responses to new circumstances. The members of "G" and "M" were not used to having classroom based responsibility for their own learning – and could not readily adjust to such a novel opportunity. The unanticipated technical barriers rendered it 'too difficult' for members of "G" to come to terms with the novelty of the experience. Emotions arising from their 'learning anxiety' gained ascendancy, and they were unable to move much beyond 'scapegoating' or 'dodging' in the time available to them.

Outcomes

Despite all the problems encountered, about 95% of students were successful in at least one attempt to get online. While many of the resulting messages were critical of the effort involved, they were evidence that students were becoming acquainted with the Internet and learning about computer-based learning resources. One student commented, "I learnt the importance of effective

communication . . . I know we probably all say we are aware that good communication is important, but I wonder how we all practise it?" Another student said, "The best thing about doing "XB" was making contact with the Internet at last. It is not as threatening as I had imagined." These messages summed up the experience for many of their peers.

My own learning gained while addressing the problems encountered has led me to undertake the development of a staff learning program to assist Faculty staff make the transition to greater involvement in online learning. These experiences also led to a number of changes when 'XB' was run in 1999 including: · students were assessed for computer competence and some help was made available; · more time was allowed for introducing TopClass; · greater emphasis was placed on the self-management possibilities in 'XB'; and · I allowed myself more preparation time to support the online learning.

Conclusions

When theoretical knowledge about personal and organisational behaviour collides with emotions aroused by encounters with new technology, the emotions are likely to be the more powerful forces of all those present. Ironically, re-reading the manual did eventually help some participants understand the theoretical explanations for their behaviour while not immediately helping them to resolve the emotional turmoil unexpectedly encountered along the way.

Getting online in this subject was intended as part of the learning process, instead it became a key part of the product. This is not a recommended outcome, but may accompany many adult learners' first encounters with the realities of the Internet.

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