

'A' grade. So—what are we to do? How do we motivate the students, while also working toward clear assessment of learning outcomes? How do we encourage the stories within all of us—professors and students alike—to emerge? How do we learn from one another across disciplines? For those of us for whom stories are central, how do we find ourselves in the numbers and the charts? For those of us for whom the norm is that which is measurable and quantifiable, how do we nurture elements of surprise and celebrate in our classrooms that which is human and at times quirky?

As our stories above intended to illustrate, it all comes back to the art of reflection. When we

engage in deep reflection about our teaching, when we self-consciously and deliberately study our classrooms as much as we study our disciplines, our abilities to see improve. And so does our teaching. As important as the books are, as important as the measurements are, what really counts ultimately is the experience of each individual student. Sometimes—just sometimes—we need to set aside the course books, the carefully planned lessons, the statistics, so that the larger, more significant text of teaching and learning remains front and center. Ultimately, what really counts is the experience of the class—even in the rain.

VLE segregation or integration? How should distance learning and taught modes be treated?

Chris Papadopoulos & Susan Sapsed, Health and Social Sciences, University of Bedfordshire

Introduction

In 2007, the MSc Public Health course at the University of Bedfordshire developed and launched a distance learning mode as an alternative to its existing 'taught' (classroom-based) mode of learning. Part of the rationale for its conception was the growing number of international students registering for the course. Also, a number of overseas governments and employers had been keen to support their staff to undertake the MSc Public Health but were unable to meet the travel and living costs in the UK. Initially, 10 distance learning students registered. Today, the course has 30 distance learning students.

With the number of distance learning students likely to continue to grow, and distance learning becoming more prominent within the education sector (Allen and Seaman, 2008), a key issue to address is whether to segregate distance learning students into one, distance-learning exclusive Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)-based

community, or to combine both sets of students into one, integrative VLE-based community. In order to explore this issue, this paper will introduce some of the key concepts and then describe how distance learners and taught students currently access and interact with their learning material on the course. It will then critically appraise some of the key pedagogical and practical considerations associated with VLE segregation/integration.

Disentangling VLEs, e-learning and distance learning

VLEs are defined as an online environment where a range of interactions take place between tutors and students, and, as such, are a key form of e-learning technology (JISC, 2002). Fry (2000) defines e-learning as the 'delivery of training and education via networked interactivity and a range of other knowledge collection and distribution technologies'. Wild et al's (2002) definition states that e-learning is both self-learning and collaborative-learning through technology. Thus,

e-learning can be viewed as a social and collaborative process involving the application of various digital technologies, all aimed to enhance the quality of student learning. The terms 'e-learning' and 'distance learning' are often used interchangeably. However, e-learning technology can be used in conjunction with taught/classroom learning, in which case the term 'blended learning' is commonly used. When e-learning is exclusively used by students not physically present in classrooms, then the term 'distance learning' can be more appropriately applied. This is supported by Honeyman and Miller (1993) who argue that 'distance learning is a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both.'

The fast rise of distance learning in the last decade has taken place against a complex backdrop of cultural and social change, and technological advances. Simultaneously, educational theory has also been changing. According to Anderson and Dron (2011), during this time, theories of learning have shifted from 'cognitive-behaviourist' to 'social constructivist' to 'connectivist' pedagogical models. A cognitive-behaviourist model sees learning as something that is 'acquired' through a sequence of linear stages leading to a predefined goal, with periodic reinforcement of learned constructs, knowledge and behaviour. Social constructivist models view learning that is directly affected by the student's social environment, context and relationships (Greenhow et al, 2009). Students do not merely passively consume knowledge in an isolated manner; instead, students actively create and integrate this new knowledge with their existing knowledge.

'Connectivism' is the most recent educational pedagogy to emerge (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2007). It sees learning as the process of building networks of information, contacts, and resources that are applied to real problems. It explicitly relies upon the ubiquity of networked connections between people, digital artefacts and content. It also assumes that information is plentiful and that the learner's role is not to memorize or even understand everything, but to have the capacity to

find and apply knowledge when and where it is needed.

The current status/structure

Currently, all taught and distance learning students are integrated together and therefore share access to the same 'BREO' (Bedfordshire Resources for Education Online) area. BREO is the University's local VLE. The key e-learning tools that all MSc Public Health students can currently utilise are as follows:

- *Access to teaching materials*: This includes all digital artefacts uploaded by course lecturers which have been used in classroom settings or recommended to study in conjunction with classroom learning (e.g. lecture presentations, reading lists, and other multimedia content).
- *Assignments and formative tests*: BREO supports a software tool called 'TurnItIn' which is an internet-based assignment submission platform. This tool is useful for a number of reasons, particularly with regard to offering a user-friendly, safe, and secure environment for students to submit their electronic assignments, and, in particular, in detecting and deterring plagiarism.
- *Access to the electronic learning resources*: BREO can be used by students as an adjunct to other electronic learning resources such as the online library catalogue, electronic journals and electronic books which students use to search for electronic learning material such as journal articles or book chapters.
- *Blackboard Collaborate*: This is a BREO software plug-in which allows for synchronous teacher-student and student-student communication, both through live instant messaging and video-conferencing.
- *Asynchronous collaboration and communication among students and between students and lecturers*: BREO affords students and lecturers to electronically communicate in a number of ways. Specifically, this includes:
 - *Discussion boards*: This area enables students (and lecturers) to engage in discussion and debate within electronic forums. Students can either communicate on 'threads' (topics) that lecturers have purposefully and selectively prepared, or custom-create their own threads.

- *Wikis*: This tool allows any BREO user to create and edit any number of interlinked web pages. Students can use this tool to introduce themselves to each other, to communicate with each other about anything relevant to the course, and to custom-build their own inter-linked 'web of knowledge'.
- *The announcements page*: This tool allows staff to convey important notices and information to the course students on the BREO front page. Announcements can also be concurrently emailed to all students (and staff) to increase the likelihood of the message being successfully delivered to the intended recipients.
- *Group email*: This function enables staff to email all (or subsets) of the course students as an alternative to posting an announcement.
- *Access to the 'online learning materials'*: Developed using the e-learning software package 'Articulate Studio '09', these are interactive, content-rich, Flash-based presentations which mirror the structure of the course's teaching blocks (sessions). These materials, produced specifically for distance learners, were constructed as an augmentation of the classroom-based teaching materials, many of which are, unsurprisingly, much more suitable for classroom environments.

Pedagogical considerations

Perhaps one of the most logical steps towards beginning to critically appraise the issue of VLE integration/segregation for taught and distance learning students is to consider how both scenarios best align to pedagogical ideals. But what are these ideals? If social constructivist pedagogy is adhered to, then the emphasis should be placed on helping students to critically amalgamate new knowledge against their own social and cultural contexts, experiences and ideas. Thus, when students encounter something new, they can reconcile it with their previous ideas and experience, and in the process either change what they understand or discard the new information as irrelevant. As such, learning is an active, mental process rather than a passive reception of teaching. Many researchers have argued that this pedagogy is a good fit for e-learning because it

ensures that learning occurs among learners (Harman & Koohang, 2005; Koohang and Harman, 2005). More specifically, according to Koohang et al (2009), students can more effectively assimilate knowledge in an active manner within online environments because of the enhanced opportunities for collaboration, social negotiation and, crucially, exposure to multiple perspectives and representations of content, ideas and concepts from other students sharing the same VLE. Given this, it is logical to assume effective social constructivism is more likely to occur within a VLE that offers the greatest level of collaboration with students from differing social contexts and who have differing perspectives and viewpoints on knowledge. Taught students are perhaps even more likely to gain from this because an integrative VLE allows for collaboration with learners who are geographically (and thus socially and culturally) separated from them.

As previously stated, another, more recent pedagogy to surface is 'connectivism' which views learning as dependent on the development of connections and networks of knowledge and information. As such, it views the interplay between people, society and technology as crucial. It is based on the premise that knowledge exists in the world and its systems rather than in the mind of an individual. Web 2.0 technologies, such as wikis and social networking, can be seen as obvious examples of connectivism since they offer individuals to collaborate, and to connect, share and build information and knowledge. If we are to align ourselves with this pedagogy, then, according to Downes (2011), the following two key principles of connectivism need to be realised; (a) learning and knowledge rests in the diversity of opinions and (b) learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks (Downes, 2011). Given these principles, a large, integrative, and collaborative online space would appear to offer an almost natural fit with connectivist pedagogy. Another significant consideration here is the transfer between modes. Consider the following scenario: a taught student has spent 25% of the course time developing connections with taught and distance learning students and sharing information and knowledge. If he/she needs to

transfer over to the distance learning mode and continue his/her studies, then remaining in the same, integrative VLE retains the connections that he/she has previously made.

However, transferring into a distinct distance learning VLE would mean that these online connections have been lost, and he/she will have to begin making new connections with a new online community again. Indeed, as Brown (2011) states, the matter of mode transfer is now a vital, modern-day consideration: 'today's students demand greater flexibility as they juggle careers, family and other commitments. People retraining or undertaking postgraduate qualifications to support their careers often have no alternative. This point cannot be ignored, especially as the basic principle of learning design is to develop courses that meet students' needs.'

Therefore, if we are to base a decision on VLE integration/segregation purely on pedagogical theory, VLE integration appears to be the logical and rational choice.

Other considerations

In order to comprehensively appraise the integration/segregation question, it is perhaps wise to consider more than just pedagogical theory, including a consideration of the practical issues involved. It could be argued that directing distance learners to their own VLE could allow for an environment that is easier for distance learners to navigate through. This is because distance learners would not be presented with any of the content that is specifically geared or created for taught students (such as, for example, the taught course handbook version). Distance learners would also not have to worry about being confused by any announcements made on the BREO home screen which are not relevant for them. However, VLE integration can, to an extent, avoid both of these issues. For the former, specific folders which contain distance learning materials only can be created. For the latter, staff need to make it explicitly clear which announcements are only relevant for taught or distance learning students.

Another consideration is the impact that VLE integration/segregation has upon the time resources of staff. Logically, it would take a tutor less time to upload and organise material into one integrative VLE than to repeat the same process for another VLE. This may at first seem like a negligible burden of staff time; however, after one considers that a tutor is likely to need to upload many materials across several units on a weekly or perhaps daily basis through term time, it becomes a much more prominent issue. Of course, staff do much more than uploading materials into BREO. For example, they also asynchronously communicate with students and other tutors, manage assessments using 'Turnitin', and interact with various other e-learning tools. Therefore, VLE segregation could amount to a considerable extra burden on staff time.

Another key consideration is the issue of 'equivalent experience', that is, that students from both modes are being offered and provided the same, equivalent opportunities to learn and benefit from the course. Since the course fees are the same for both modes, this also becomes an equity issue. There is a case to be made that having two separate VLE spaces more effectively assures equivalent experience between modes. This is because in an integrative VLE, both categories of students share access to all of the same digital artefacts and e-learning tools. However, crucially, distance learning students do not benefit from classroom sessions. One possible (and uncomplicated) method towards addressing this apparent inequity is to deny taught students permission to access the 'online learning materials' resource. This would involve using BREO to create two 'student groups' (a taught and a distance learning group). Both of these groups would be assigned the same permissions to all of the content with the exception of the 'online learning materials' resource to which permission would be restricted for the taught group. Another possible solution to this problem is to amend the course fees so that taught students pay a little more. However, this is a business decision that would have significant repercussions across the entire institution. The other obvious option would be to create two separate VLEs in which the 'online

learning materials' are not offered on the taught-specific BREQ site. However, restricting taught students access to the 'online learning materials' resource comes with some consequences that also need considering. Firstly, it is reasonable to presume that some taught students greatly benefit from this resource, particularly if they are more suited to visual learning than auditory learning (Hawk and Shah, 2007). Furthermore, the large majority of MSc Public Health students are international students for whom English is not their first language. Therefore, having such a resource augments and helps to clarify any uncertainty or confusion about classroom lectures due to language difficulties. Thus, for these taught students, restricting them access to this resource could be a significant detriment to them. On the other hand, there is a case to be made that some taught students might (consciously or subconsciously) choose to disengage from classroom sessions (even if they physically attend) if they perceive the online learning materials resource as their primary source of learning content. Thus, restricting them access to this resource may increase the likelihood of maximum classroom attentiveness and engagement.

Conclusion

The question of whether to combine taught and distance learning students into a single, integrative VLE, or to segregate them into two specific VLE environments is, until now, a previously unexplored issue. With the growing emergence of e-learning and, in particular, distance learning, the need for educationalists to critically appraise what solution is most appropriate for them will undoubtedly continue to surface. Having appraised some of the key considerations of the issue, it appears that VLE integration aligns with pedagogical and other key practical issues more effectively than VLE segregation. However, educational institutions which employ a different type of VLE which cannot set content permissions to specific student groups, and which prioritise the issues of equivalent experience and equity over all other considerations, may find VLE segregation their best option.

In order to continue to critically evaluate this issue, there is a clear and essential need for evidence. However, collecting evidence which effectively contributes towards this issue presents new challenges. For example, one could evaluate taught and distance learners' students' opinions and preferences on this matter, but do students really know what is best for them? Does the student perspective hold more weight than the teachers/academics' perspective? On the other hand, would investigating academics' views be useful to this debate? Should we be concerned with collecting generalisable data? How can we make the best and most informed decisions about VLE integration/segregation from collected data? Thus, while collecting primary evidence would appear to be a logical next step towards more comprehensively appraising this issue, collecting the right type of evidence and applying it to the issue in an effective, valid manner would appear to need just as much careful consideration.

References

- Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2006). *Making the grade: Online education in the United States*. Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium.
- Anderson, T. & Dron, J. (2011). Three generations of distance education pedagogy. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12 (3) [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/890/1663>
- Brown, M.E. (2011). Standing up for Teaching: The 'crime' of striving for excellence. *Journal of Pedagogical Development*, 1 (2) [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from <http://www.beds.ac.uk/learning/support/jpd/volume-1-issue-2#11>
- Downes, S. (2007). *An introduction to connective knowledge* in Hug, Theo (ed.): *Media, Knowledge and Education - exploring new spaces, relations and dynamics in digital media ecologies*. Proceedings of the International Conference held on June 25-26, 2007. November 27, 2007. Type: B - Publications in Refereed Conference Proceedings [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from: <http://www.downes.ca/post/33034>
- Downes, S. (2011). 'Connectivism' and Connective Knowledge. Huffington Post [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-downes/connectivism-and-connecti_b_804653.html

- Fry, K. (2000). Forum focus and overview: The business of E-learning: Bringing your organization in the knowledge economy. Telcam Group, University of Technology, Sydney.
- Greenhow, C., Robelia, B., & Hughes, J. (2009). Learning, teaching, and scholarship in a digital age: Web 2.0 and classroom research: What path should we take now? *Educational Researcher*, 38, p246–259.
- Harman, K. & Koohang, A. (2005). Discussion board: A learning object. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Knowledge and Learning Objects*, 1, p67-77 [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from: <http://ijello.org/Volume1/v1p067-077Harman.pdf>
- Hawk, T.F. & Shah, A.J. (2007). Using learning style instruments to enhance student learning. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 5 (1), p1-19.
- Honeyman, M. & Miller, G. (1993). Agriculture distance education: A valid alternative for higher education? *Proceedings of the 20th Annual National Agricultural Education Research Meeting*: 67–73.
- JISC (2002) Briefing paper 1: MLEs and VLEs explained. [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from: <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/buildmlehefe/lifelonglearning/mlebriefingpack/1>
- Koohang, A. & Harman, K. (2005). Open source: A metaphor for e-learning. *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, 8, p75-86 [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from <http://inform.nu/Articles/Vol8/v8p075-086Kooh.pdf>
- Koohang, A et al (2009). E-learning and constructivism: From theory to application, 5, p91-109 [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from <http://ijklo.org/Volume5/IJELLOv5p091-109Koohang655.pdf>
- Siemens, G. (2005). A learning theory for the digital age. *Instructional Technology and Distance Education*, 2 (1), p.3–10 [accessed 10th March 2012]. Available from: <http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>
- Wild, R.H., Griggs, K.A., & Downing, T. (2002). A framework for e-learning as a tool for knowledge management. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, 102 (7), p371-380.

Reflecting on the Transition from Practice to Education – The Journey to Becoming an Effective Teacher in Higher Education

Rebecca Jones, Lecturer in Children's Nursing, University of Bedfordshire ¹

teacher to be dynamic, supportive, caring, empathetic, challenging and knowledgeable.

Keywords: Supporting new teachers, reflection, transition to higher education, facilitating learning, role boundaries

Summary

This paper discusses the journey of transition from practice to education by reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of this process. It utilises reflective principles to identify strategies for universities and the higher education sector to consider when supporting new teachers. Higher education presents a significant challenge for new academic staff in becoming competent and overcoming the barriers that may impact on students' learning. Nurse education requires a

Maintaining the balance of the role in supporting students and sustaining identity for new teachers is the beginning of the journey to becoming an effective teacher in higher education.

Introduction

To be a successful academic in nursing education, two core ingredients are required: practice experience and teaching skills. This enables new academics to facilitate development, identify professional boundaries and support students to acquire the skills necessary to become competent in practice. Transition is a process undertaken when professionals move into another speciality. A number of studies (MacNeil, 1997, Peel, 2005; Sinclair et al, 2005) aimed at addressing the transition into higher education highlighted local

¹ These were Becci's details when her piece was accepted for publication. Becci has since moved to the position of Child Tutor at the University of Surrey.