The University of Edinburgh
Principal's Teaching Award Scheme

Project Final Report

Innovations in (Online) Reflexive Practice: Linking Theory with Technique within the Virtual Learning Environment

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> *As learning contexts are increasingly rich in electronic and mobile technologies, so research into e-learning has more to offer the mainstream of educational practice.*
>
> (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007)

Background

Reflexive Practice (RP) is a continuous process through which those responsible for delivering educational content critically reflect upon their behaviour and the impact this may have upon student learning and experience. According to Schön (1983) RP is a continuous process by which those delivering educational content monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their conduct. This report summaries the design and outcomes of a PTAS funded two strand qualitative study undertaken during January – May 2014; exploring the uniqueness, as well as the development of innovative approaches and practical techniques for incorporating RP within the virtual learning environment. Drawing on the experiences of students, tutors, an e-learning co-ordinator and key funding stakeholders connected to our online MSc Dementia: International Experience, Policy & Practice (MScD, IAD), strand one of this project explored RP in online learning, as well as developing innovative approaches and practical techniques for incorporating RP within the VLE. In line with Beetham and Sharpe (2007), we viewed this as an opportunity to enhance approaches to RP both within the e-learning as well as "*mainstream educational practice*". This report concludes with a series of practical recommendations for facilitating reflexive teaching in e-learning communities

In order to explore the uniqueness of the online experience and its implications for developing RP, students, module tutors and funders involved in online MScD programme; as well as our campus-based MSc Integrated Service Improvement (MSc ISI) programme were also interviewed for strand two of the project. Both of these

programmes are highly comparable in terms of student demographics, professional backgrounds and intended learning outcomes.

Results for strand one highlighted the dialogical development and occurrence of "*light bulb"* moments: the threshold or epiphanous experiences in which transformational learning is experienced by online students. Strand two highlighted the replication of the anticipated learning visions and transformational outcomes of both online and campus-based group members.

Design and précis of findings

Nick Jenkins and Jo Alexjuk applied a two-strand parallel thematic method for both strand one and strand two of the research enquiry. Strand one involved the elucidation of data analysis in relation to the format of self-representation of members of an online postgraduate programme within the VLE community. Whilst strand two utilised a thematic analysis of interview data in relation to: the learning visions and transformational outcomes of the online cohort in comparison with members of the postgraduate campus-based programme.

Strand one:

This strand involved a two-phased thematic content analysis of the asynchronous and synchronous discussions, which were extrapolated and analysed to interpret the types of conversation, rhythm and personal meanings of key moments in exchanges between the ten international and UK students and members of the teaching team from the core module MScD: International Approaches to Dementia. This module was delivered during semester one of the 2013/14 academic year. Students' discussion comments for both formats were not academically assessed and therefore not part of the final grading process.

An analysis of the dialogical data from both online discussion formats was undertaken to highlighted prevalent superordinate and sub-themes which correspond to the following three research questions:

- How do students and tutors present their 'digital selves' within the VLE?

- How are aspects of transformational learning (e.g. 'threshold', 'epiphanies' / 'light bulb') moments manifested in synchronous and asynchronous forms of interaction?

- How do students express their concerns, fears or anxieties about learning and how are these responded to by course tutors?

By answering these questions, we envisaged that we would begin to develop some tentative first steps towards developing a more nuanced understanding of "what works" in promoting RP within higher education e-learning.

Findings highlighted that that students openly presented their 'digital selves' with emotive dialogue relating to personal, theoretical and 'real world' practice issues. However, albeit the fact that the tutor utilised emoticons, there was limited use of any form of text generated, smiley faces or symbols by students in both asynchronous and synchronous discussions.

Examples of transformational learning and subsequent 'light bulb' moments incurred during and after 'skilled conversations' between the tutor and students, but more often between students themselves in applying theoretical understanding to their 'real world' working practice. From week three of the module additional and appropriate resources were spontaneously shared between students, highlighting cultural differences in dementia care theory and practice. Students expressed their concerns, fears and anxieties openly from week one of the MSc D online module. In particular in relation to: the navigational aspects of the learning platform (Moodle) and other technology-related queries; module workload and assessment issues.

An example of a "light bulb" moment, made during week one by an international student was:

> *"As a physiotherapist, I have to openly admit that I have spent the past 30 years living and breathing the biomedical model. For me to understand and grasp all of these psychological concepts, supported by some early research described in Kitwood's paper, is tough because of my life experiences to date, environment and background ...I'm not throwing in the towel, but I do acknowledge I have a lot to learn about the person living with dementia".*

This comment prompted the module tutor to offer a coaxing response by saying:

> "*… don't throw in the towel [name of student], there is so much more!*
> *(and use of big grin emoticon)*"

Strand two:
Strand two involved drawing on the core principles of interpretive enquiry by conducted in-depth interviews with members involved with the MScD IAD module in comparison with those involved with the MSc ISI programme to explore interviewees' perspectives of online teaching. The nature of the topic guide was kept deliberately open, so as to encourage interviewees to raise issues and talk about experiences that they, themselves, deemed to be of relevance. It was anticipated, however, that discussions would focus on the 'learning visions' of the various interviewees. By 'learning visions' we are referring to interviewees':

> ➢ Anticipated and trans-formational outcomes of the learning process by all participants
> ➢ Actual and perceived experiences of 'Being' an online learner

➢ Understandings of the relationship between tutor and student within the online or face-to-face teaching environment

In total the retrieved data from thirteen participant interviewees were thematically analysed to reflect participants' value, attitudes and beliefs as a representation of his or her worldview perspective. All audio transcripts of the interviews from strand two were initially analysed by using an iterative method to clarify the development of thematic frequency. Then a secondary phase of analysis was then applied to this data by using a thematic framework in relation to participants: *values, attitudes* and *beliefs.*

With regard to transformational outcomes of their learning process one campus-based student echoed a similar statement to those students involved with the online programme by saying:

> *"I think there has been a transformation. I definitely feel more confident about what I'm talking about, which is one of the main reasons for doing the course"*

In relation to actual and perceived experiences of 'being' an online one international online student stated:

> "*I would say the process is different than what I imagined … I had never done an on-line class previous to this … really wasn't sure what to anticipate as far as how the interactions were going to go. You know how I would link with the instructors (tutors) … with other students … My son's challenge in taking an on-line course - absolutely abhorred it, did not like it at all. I think my experience has been so different that he is now thinking about exploring on-line classes as a result*!"

In answering the question relating to the relationship between tutor and student one member of the campus-based teaching team highlighted a recurrent theme applicable to both teaching formats that it is the duty of the tutor:

> "*To be responsive and to response to what students are saying and thinking, in an open, honest and constructive way. To treat them seriously as people and as thinks and as researchers"*

Dissemination

Various modes of dissemination took place. Beginning with: a presentation at the HiSS school away day in June 2014; a poster and nano teach presentation at the Higher Education Academy Conference in July 2014. Also a presentation of the research was given to UoE colleagues at the '*Gearing up for Transitions Event*' in 2015, as well as submission to the journal: Technology, Pedagogy and Education.

Summary

In addition to improving quality, delivering on student/funder expectations and demonstrating our ability to learn from our key stakeholders, the recommendation of this project will have further reaching implications for the current development of online education within the University of Edinburgh. Specifically, it will enable us to generate a theoretically and empirically informed framework for developing RP in online learning that will be available to course tutors and Programme Directors from across the University.

Whilst we anticipate that these resources will be of primary benefit to courses within the College of Humanities and Social Science, the potential for translation within the biomedical and natural sciences is a promising area. By initiating this project and sharing our results with colleagues within our College and beyond, our framework will form the basis of future research and development across the University.

References

Beetham, H., and R. Sharpe (2007) Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: Designing and delivering e-Learning. Abingdon: Routledge.

Schön, D. (1983) The Reflexive Practitioner: How Practitioners Think in Action. New York, NY: Basic Books.