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USING CROSS-DISCIPLINARY ACTION LEARNING SETS WHEN DESIGNING ONLINE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The drive to find appropriate ways to integrate online technologies into assessment has come about within Australian higher education as a consequence of widely held aspirations to remain competitive in the global marketplace. An action research initiative at Southern Cross University reported in this paper suggests both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons why academics considering online assessment may or may not follow through with immediate implementation. More specifically, a cross-disciplinary action learning set in the case study presented has shown benefits in approaching educational design as a cyclical, collegial, creative and reflexive process for planning, implementing and evaluating online assessment.

Keywords

online assessment, educational design, action learning, action research

Introduction

While the quality assurance framework in Australia's higher education sector makes no distinction between modes of delivery such as on-campus, distance education or online, the main issues of concern for the Australian University's Quality Agency (AUQA, established in March 2000) have been the quality and appropriateness of pedagogy and the effective use of available technologies. With the imperative for higher education to find appropriate ways to integrate online technologies into its practices and thus to stay competitive in the global educational marketplace, there is an increase in access to and use of online approaches to teaching and learning. 95% of students enrolled in Australian universities now report making regular use of online technologies (Oliver & Towers, 2000) compared with only 50% in the mid 1990s (Ellis, Debrecey, & Hayden, 1995).

The term 'e-learning' is now commonly used to refer to the situation where both on-campus and off-campus learners can work online either alone or in small groups to complete the requirements of their studies (Gallagher, 2001). Whether the curriculum is supplemented by online elements, dependent on them or completely integrated into an online format, subjects are now available to students enrolled in Australian universities where some level of e-learning can be expected. But as educational design, curriculum development and academic staff development have incorporated online teaching and learning, use of the online environment for assessment has not followed so readily.

Assessment is clearly a major focal point in the relationship between students and the university. Redesigning the assessment process in order to make best use of current technologies requires staff to consider many important questions. What is different about designing assessment for online and how might we do it? Is it appropriate across all disciplines and student groups? What other factors influence our decisions on whether or not to design assessment for online? Decisions will be influenced by what benefits might be achieved for students and staff, and what levels of institutional supports are available to assist the move. Considerations which also influence the decision to design online assessment include disciplinary characteristics, how to clearly communicate to students the relevance of the online context

to the assessment process, as well as how to articulate the required criteria and standards to be achieved, and how to achieve sustainable strategies for marking, and managing the workload (Morgan, Dunn, Parry, & O'Reilly, 2003). It is the educational designer's role to support academic staff in a range of discipline areas to consider these questions in designing effective forms of assessment within unit offerings. Typically, this occurs between a staff member (or subject matter expert) and an educational designer, who exchange ideas and discussions over several weeks before the development process is facilitated (Keppell, 2000). Such a one-to-one approach, though withstanding the test of time, nevertheless reflects a rather scant level of institutional support for the espoused global imperative of integrating technology into teaching, learning and assessment.

This paper describes an innovative approach to educational design with a group of academic and non-academic staff. The cross-disciplinary action learning set in this case is shown to be a creative and inspiring approach to designing online assessment.

Research processes

With many possibilities now evident in online forms of assessment, educational design practices themselves have gained a valuable impetus for innovation. At Southern Cross University (SCU), action learning sets were used to explore the alliances and potentials for optimising creative outcomes of the educational design process. Through a series of meetings where a small number of academic and support staff came together in a cross-disciplinary group, decisions on how and why to use online assessment were explored. These are described in a case study of one action learning set (pseudonyms are used).

Firstly, to understand the current context in which academic staff are designing online assessment and the existing level of institutional support provided, a Web-based survey was made openly available and in addition, academic staff of four Universities were specifically targeted for participation. These universities were selected for their similarity as dual-mode institutions in regional locations - Charles Sturt University, Southern Cross University, University of New England and University of Southern Queensland. To date, the survey data obtained has been very limited and is used here only to supplement the discussions of the action learning set - the first cycle in a series of action research cycles.

Surveying those who assess online

The survey was placed on a Web site in May 2002 and, with the permission of each university, an announcement was broadcast to all academic staff requesting completion. The request was framed in terms of seeking background information about the broad context in which they were designing, implementing and evaluating their online assessment practices. Completion was voluntary and the sample therefore self-selected. Following some initial demographic queries, the core survey questions were predicated on some form of online assessment being attempted, thus not everyone who accessed the survey may have been able to complete it. While response rates were small, from 1 to 7 replies from each institution, the information offers an indication of how current moves to online assessment in Australian regional dual-mode universities are impacting on staff.

Responses:

Charles Sturt University	6
Southern Cross University	7
University of New England	1
University of Southern Queensland	5
TOTAL	19

There was an almost equal representation of males (n=9) and females (n=10) with the majority being aged 46-55 (n=10). Most respondents were employed full-time on continuing contracts (n=16) and the majority were classified at Lecturer, Level B (n=12) who had been employed for over 10 years (n=10). The disciplines represented by respondents were management and commerce (n=6), education (n=5), health (n=4), information technology (n=2), natural and physical sciences (n=1) and maths (n=1). The majority

of respondents had the responsibility of teaching into both postgraduate and undergraduate programs (n=11). All 19 respondents were attempting something in terms of assessment online and proceeded to provide details of their initiatives, the strengths and weaknesses and any evaluation data they had collected. The full report will not be provided in this paper.

Reasons given for deciding to implement online assessment were predominantly to do with personal interest (n=7), as well as being required by the university (n=4), addressing an identified problem (n=4), creating a virtual community and aiding learning (n=2), most relevant to format (n=2); and representing best fit to content or student interests (n=2). The level of institutional support for online assessment was overall "too little" with most support being available for troubleshooting technical problems, followed by the provision of technical skills training. The least amount of support was for time release to design online components of assessment. This finding reflects the support most requested by faculty in Bonk's report (2001) where 70% of staff sampled (n=222) requested release time in recognition of the demands of online teaching.

The kinds of innovations reported by this sample of respondents was typical of the range of online assessable tasks reported in the literature (Kerka, Wonacott, Grossman, & Wagner, 2000; O'Reilly, 2002). These included take-home exams, online submissions of written work, quizzes and tests, discussions, and progress reports.

Basically, this small sample shows that innovations in online assessment reflect academics' initial reasons for taking assessment online i.e. largely personal interest, and a belief in the appropriateness of technology to support their pedagogy. We can also see that these initiatives have been implemented regardless of the low levels of institutional support provided.

An action learning set

At the same time as these surveys were being completed, an action research initiative was commenced at SCU with a small sample of three academic staff and two support staff interested in improving their approaches to online assessment. Action research methodology allowed for the educational designer to also work with this group of staff on a mutually agreed goal. The particular innovation of this case study is the establishment of a cross-disciplinary action learning set as a way of exploring design of assessment from a diversity of perspectives. The small size of the group (5) allowed regular and profound reflections on practice.

A series of six meetings enabled a collegial approach to be taken to designing, implementing and evaluating the range of online assessment schemes proposed by each academic. The three academics involved were from each of the disciplines of social science, exercise science and management, and commerce and management. In the course of the action learning cycle it was agreed to include a member of the University's online team (team leader) and a reference librarian into the collegial design process. Questions identified by the group for its consideration included: whether to design an online component of assessment and why; how to design assessment for the subject given the opportunities available online; how authentic would such assessment approaches be in view of the specific learning objectives of each subject; and how might students respond to these online assessments given that some groups were studying on-campus and some off-campus.

As both educational designer and action learning set adviser, the author's role included identifying suitable staff to bring together for an action learning set, establishing ground rules, coordinating meetings and records of these, maintaining focus on the specific design dilemmas of each member, encouraging and modelling critical reflection and supporting the development of individual action plans (O'Hara, Beaty, Lawson, & Bourner, 1997). Email prompts to participants between meetings and the author's personal reflective notes explored ideas for developing and improving educational design of online assessment with this cross-disciplinary group of academic staff.

The action learning set met approximately every three weeks with discussion focussed on design of assessment for each subject in turn. The online team leader and the reference librarian (who was

to support an online research activity in one of the subjects) provided additional input. Part of the educational designer's role was to record and transcribe discussions from each meeting and to circulate this for members to check. A few options were available for keeping a personal reflective journal, though the regular meetings themselves were seen as the dedicated time for reflection. One academic also recorded reflections between meetings in personal notes and via email and phone contact to explore design of assessment for best use of the opportunities afforded online.

The processes in the set were aimed to support participants' focus on both their actions and their learning (Weinstein, 1995). The initial expectations of the set were simply to work collaboratively to design assessment for the online environment and to be of mutual assistance in this process. The basic structural feature of the meetings was of taking one person's focus at a time. With an explicit assurance of confidentiality and dedicated time for open reflection on their ideas, each staff member was able to work on developing ideas and working towards solutions. Silences were respected and all judgements were reserved. Probing questions by each member of the set were the key to challenging and clarifying and often resulted in insights, ideas and a discussion on suggestions. As the meetings continued, participants became more aware of their own unexpected learning and of other perspectives for exploring their approaches to design of online assessment.

What follows is a detailed description of the experiences and reflections of each of the participants in the action learning process.

Case study of an action learning set

Salir and Nore

Salir, the academic in this case, enrolled in an online staff development workshop early in 2002 during which he decided to adopt a suggestion by library staff that they be more integrated into the teaching session with off-campus students via the online environment (O'Reilly & Ellis, 2002). In addition to this idea of including a reference librarian, Salir completed the workshop with plans to use the virtual classroom (part of the Blackboard environment that uses synchronous technology) as a replacement for telephone tutorials.

The unit Salir teaches is a later year subject that challenges students to apply relevant principles and standards of corporate accounting from a critical viewpoint, and to exercise their emerging skills of professional judgement. It is an elective in both the Bachelor of Business and the Bachelor of Accounting programs and has till now been taught exclusively on campus. One unique feature of its assessment scheme has been that students are assumed to start with a High Distinction and need to commit to maintaining that level of achievement or decide to accept a lesser level as they experience their own constraints to progress.

As a result of a recent decision to externalise the unit, it was necessary to redesign what had been a very successful assessment task, the oral exam. During the action learning cycle, the format of this assessment task was revised to be a semester-long discussion forum into which students would be required to contribute their findings from a literature review and to comment upon the contribution of others around key questions of earnings management. This assessment design was aimed at facilitating an exchange of views and a critique of accounting principles across cultures and genres of expression, however arrangements to link SCU students with a group from a UK University for collaborative literature searches and shared comments were unsuccessful to date. The idea will be followed up later since the benefits of transcultural discussions (Rimington, O'Reilly, Gibson, & Gordon, 2003), are considered as extremely valuable in this subject.

By coincidence, SCU was visited by the AUQA team during the teaching of this unit, and instead of providing the team with paper-based descriptions of the teaching innovation, Salir checked with the students to see if they may enjoy being part of a quality audit process as they studied various forms of audits in their accounting subject. With the students' consent, Salir opened up access to the unit for an online quality review to occur during its live teaching phase.

Meanwhile, the types of sources students were required to investigate included professional magazines, journals, books and a range of international sources. A reference librarian, Nore, was involved within the synchronous chat sessions to advance students' research skills development and to link them to comprehensive library support services. Markland (2003) confirms that such a collaborative approach has potential to enhance the experience for learners, especially if librarians or information literacy professionals, skilled in accessing and managing information, offer support to academic staff by training and interacting with students in the online teaching environment.

After implementation of this assessment strategy, it was found that the chat sessions conducted in the virtual classroom worked extremely well for the specific purpose they were designed. These real-time sessions were useful for immediate resolution of queries among students, prompt interaction between the class and the reference librarian on two scheduled occasions, and as a presentation option (instead of carrying out oral presentations on the phone). The latter was carried out in a private area online so that students could be marked for their live performance, and archives were available to staff to verify these marks. Some difficulty was encountered in finding a single time for the virtual classroom sessions to suit all students at once, and it was necessary to implement a technical "work-around" when the University's firewall prevented live chat from directly accessing the library databases.

This reflective academic, Salir, has presented scholarly reflections from this experience (Rowe, 2003) and has published on lessons learnt from a larger enrolment of students in a subject taken earlier in their degree program and designed at the same time as this initiative (Rowe & Vitartas, 2003). Particularly in regards to the case reported in this paper, students were shown as being able to spontaneously extend the use of interactive features of e-learning - using synchronous chat to organise their time and prepare amongst themselves for a higher order assessment tasks that required the application of professional judgement (Rowe, 2003).

A follow-up interview with Nore, the reference librarian, has also confirmed the value of this online role in real time. In the same way that chat sessions in the unit replicated the best of classroom teaching, Nore confirmed the benefits of online consultations as they enhanced the information literacy of remote students using a non-threatening and friendly approach. The ability to observe and encourage students as they hunted for useful information using the range of library databases proved to be extremely rewarding for both students and staff and resulted in more follow-up by students as they referred to the library to complete their assignment activity. The matter of keyboard skills during live chat was of concern to the librarian but has not deterred her from organising an online consultation time this semester. "Ask the librarian" live sessions will be trialled for one hour a week in two School-wide online areas for all students whether on-campus or off-campus. Evaluation will reveal their success, though current indications show a very low volume of traffic in these sessions. Plans to incorporate librarian assistance for particular tasks within specified units are seen as more likely to be effective in engaging students.

Talil

The School of Social Sciences is one of the leading external studies providers at SCU where innovations in online activities and assessments have been successfully designed into learning packages since 1996. It is one of the only Schools at SCU that offers enrolment in a fully-online mode of study (Ellis & O'Reilly, 2001). Despite this supportive culture of the past, the academic Talil, experienced a number of distractions in 2002 as the School was in a protracted restructure and amalgamation with another School on another campus. As a result of this organisational instability, Talil's application for study leave in 2003 was denied. Notwithstanding Talil's years of experience in designing innovative, flexible and dynamic learning events, he found himself joining the collegial process of action learning with a sense of disenchantment with the University.

The unit, Sociology of Deviance, is an elective in the Bachelor of Social Science and Bachelor of Laws, as well as being available as an elective for students located overseas. It is taught in alternating modes - one semester on-campus and the next semester in a combination of off-campus and online modes. It generally attracts an enrolment of approximately 30-45 students.

During the action learning process, Talil as unit assessor decided to explore strategies for utilising the online mode for an integrated approach to assessing all student cohorts. He explored the possibilities of setting up an asynchronous dialogue among students involving the application of sociological theories to their views and experiences of deviance. This approach to online facilitation of assessment processes for both on-campus and off-campus students had emerged from student feedback as well as Talil's ongoing collaboration with Teaching and Learning Centre staff through several cycles of reflective quality enhancement. In response to earlier feedback, design of the forum for discussion this time aimed to go beyond the readings, providing an avenue for expression and exploration of multiple perspectives on issues in the syllabus. It was thought that reflective dialogue among students from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds might enrich their understanding of sociological views on deviance in society.

It was not until the unit was evaluated at end of semester 1, 2003 that the action learning set became aware of what actually occurred. It was discovered that unlike other study periods, the enrolment numbers were affected by the process of structural change within the School and in this instance the reduced numbers dictated the modes in which the unit was offered. As a small number of students chose each of the three modes of study, it was decided to offer internal and external modes simultaneously. With a range of demands on his time beyond the semester's teaching responsibilities, Talil decided "that discretion was the better part of valour". Instead of pursuing an online design where the discussion would form a component of the assessment, an unmoderated discussion forum was made commonly available to both cohorts of students.

As previously described with social science students skilled in online interaction (O'Reilly & Newton, 2002) these unmoderated forums were well used by students and in the final action learning meeting to evaluate his assessment design and implementation, Talil reflected on what might've been if he'd decided to support both cohorts through a facilitated and graded online discussion as originally proposed. Asynchronous discussion themes were pursued by students according to their own interests and for mutual assistance in ungraded supplementary activities, further confirming a number of the features of online interaction valued by social science students such as:

- Value of interacting with peers for shared goals, in a non-competitive situation
- Social cohesion
- Social constructivism
- Disciplinary relevance
- Benchmarking
- Motivation, confidence and making friends (O'Reilly & Newton, 2001).

Talil signalled the wish to continue his reflections on assessment designs and the reconceptualising of "online" in terms of how it might enrich the experiences of both internal and external students. The more general notion of e-learning as supplementary to other modes of study proved to be of particular relevance to Talil. The cyclic nature of the planning, implementation, reflection and evaluation process of assessment design once again reinforced Talil's motivation to continue pursuing improvements to assessment design in the e-learning context. He plans to build on ideas from previous experiences including the collegial exchanges core to the action learning cycle.

Though Talil is writing and publishing in his own discipline area and thus has not yet written of his experience in this instance, his interest in following-up on this action learning was expressed in the form of identifying his own staff development needs - that of enrolling in a forthcoming workshop to extend his use of the electronic procedures for assignment submission by overseas students, improving his skills to mark these submissions on-screen and gaining more experience in the virtual classroom for future adoption with on-campus and off-campus cohorts simultaneously.

Subsequent to this cycle, negotiations continue within the School to review course offerings and restructure its programs. Investment in innovative assessment design continues to suffer from the resultant uncertainties of this broad ranging review of all the undergraduate programs of the School. However, institutional support will be critical for teaching innovations in this example as the pursuit of a diversity of students' perspectives implies interaction across cultures. In such a case the concomitant trans-institutional arrangements will also require resources and support.

Ralic

The School in which Ralic teaches provides only on-campus programs to its undergraduates. However, Ralic and some of her colleagues have begun to incorporate online activities and learning supports for their classroom-based subjects. This has proven quite popular with students for ease of access to information, because, as shown in the research by Long and Hayden (2001), most undergraduate students nowadays are also part-time employees, deferring their University fees and working to pay their immediate living expenses. As Ralic's school has strong industry links, the earner-learner is a common descriptor for most students and graduate employment outcomes are very high. Ralic had also recently completed an online staff development workshop and joined the action learning cycle with many questions about how the online environment might enrich the assessment process for her on-campus learners. Without previous experience in online assessment, Ralic decided that her first year unit was too large to design for at this stage.

The unit Sports and Exercise Psychology II is a later year unit and requires the development of interview skills including the design of appropriate questions and the development of skilled approaches to asking questions, listening and probing for information. As self-reflective skills are also important in this context, students must keep a personal reflective journal and write a report. In addition, the specific learning outcomes related to the unit content include being able to identify the athlete's limitation in psychological fitness and designing an appropriate intervention program.

The reflective journal activity was proposed for ongoing completion throughout the semester, though it would simply be marked "satisfied requirements" and not be graded. Evidence of the ongoing journal activity was to be structured using online areas private to each student. The primary assessment task proposed was a report that provided a description of the issue selected for attention, an explanation of the intervention carried out and an evaluation of its effectiveness. By using extracts from the reflective journal, students were expected to match their own observation of the athlete's personal change with the interview questions they had developed in advance, thus determining the level of effectiveness of their prescribed program of fitness improvement. Other assessment tasks in this unit include a 40% exam and a 20% multiple choice quiz.

On evaluation it was found, as for Talil, that the proposed innovations had not been implemented, though for very different reasons. Rather than the extrinsic reasons given by Talil (i.e. organisational instability, uncertainty around staff availability and so forth), Ralic's main hesitation about implementing online components of assessment signified an unresolved pedagogical dilemma concerning the authenticity of adopting online assessment in a traditionally interpersonal field such as psychology. Ralic questioned how she might justify use of online communications while at the same time handling students' (and her own) expectations of face-to-face communication with the client athletes. This question of appropriateness was further highlighted by the fact that the subject was only offered on-campus and there was currently no opportunity for off-campus enrolment. However, in exploring authentic designs for on-campus students undertaking a very interactive unit, Ralic mentioned that students had enquired about an online option. Members of the action learning set suggested inviting later year students to participate in a pilot project where their involvement would contribute to the development of assessment design for online. Ralic saw this as something to definitely explore in future.

In a follow-up interview Ralic explained that as a final psychology unit in the program, she had always seen it as representing the basis of how graduates may go on to work with their clients. In reflecting on this, she wondered if this belief of online being "unlike the real world" arose from her age and habits of the past rather than being a belief shared by her younger, more Web-savvy students. She decided that "an athlete client who I work with over the Web... is a possibility", and she further expressed excitement about designing innovative assessment processes for students who have their own intrinsic motivation to learn. For example, the graduating seminars held at the end of third year seemed to present an opportunity for integrating online approaches to the assessment task, or at least in the build up towards the final seminar presentation.

Finally, the additional reasons Ralic was not able to follow-through on her ideas in designing online components of assessment were about her circumstances as both a full-time academic and part-time

doctoral candidate. "Submitting the PhD by Xmas" was given as another major reason for making no changes to the assessment - keeping the teaching arrangements as simple and sustainable as possible. On the other hand, Ralic's interest and willingness to be involved in the action learning cycle was assurance of her interest in exploring possibilities and was reinforced by her comment that "I always need to give myself an edge in teaching, otherwise it gets boring... so I will go there [online assessment] when I have head space". Despite there being no immediate implementation of innovations, Ralic's continued reflection about appropriateness, relevance and possibilities for online assessment in her psychology subjects was assiduously reinforced within the collegial action learning process (Beaty, Lawson, Bourner, & O'Hara, 1997). Ralic was particularly grateful for the shared experiences of others in the set and for the incentive to design assessment processes to be piloted with a small number of student volunteers.

Sega

The fifth member of the action learning set was the leader of the online team. Sega was a valued member of the set though her role differed significantly from the three academic staff. Nor did she have any direct involvement with students as did Nore, the reference librarian. Sega did not take a dedicated timeslot for sharing her perspective at each action learning set meeting but was instrumental in providing technical advice as well as creative ideas in response to each academic as they explored their assessment designs. Sega also worked between meetings to implement the technical elements of the assessment designs, so that testing and fine-tuning could be taking place as staff prepared to teach and assess in the following semester. Sega has recently been invited to participate in the second action learning set and has enthusiastically agreed to do so. Sega provided reflections on the creative process of assessment design and valued being involved at the design stage rather than simply at the technical troubleshooting phase as is usually the case.

Conclusions, implications and future plans

Action learning is built around the idea of a learning cycle: we act, we reflect, we analyse and we plan the next action. But there has to be more to it than this if the cycle is to become a spiral, so that instead of going around in circles we move to a new place in what we do, think and say (Weinstein, 1995: 164).

Action learning and educational design have much in common in terms of approaching and supporting change in an iterative and collaborative fashion. The initiative reported in this paper illustrates the benefits of working in cross-disciplinary action learning sets when designing online assessment. Educational design strategies were intertwined within a cyclical, collegial, creative and reflexive process. This exploration of the issues from multiple perspectives proved both fruitful and challenging. The questions considered by the action learning set concerned whether or not to design an online component of assessment and why; how to design assessment for the subject given the opportunities available online; how authentic would such assessment approaches be in view of the specific learning objectives of each subject; and how might students respond to these online assessments given that some groups were studying on-campus and some off-campus.

The case study involving three academic staff and two support staff has shown that online assessment can be enriched through provision of library support for off-campus students and that the issues of assessment in an on-campus context continue to be relevant in an e-learning context. In all cases, the authenticity of the assessment task and relevance to the unit objectives and student target group are just as significant as questions of scalability and management of the assignment submission and turnaround processes. The relevance of the assessment task was clearly evident in Salir's situation (not only as the AUQA audit team came along to illustrate real-world application of the theory) where a reference librarian supported students' research activities in real time sessions and promoted sufficient confidence among the students that they all chose to give their final presentation using the chat function rather than the telephone. The outcomes of their research activities were claimed by the academic to be of a better standard than in previous years, despite the lack of the proposed enhancement in the form of transcultural discussions.

The nature of the discipline area became quite significant in Ralic's case where students were learning the skills and approaches to assess the fitness of their athlete clients and recommending suitable intervention programs. The concept of e-learning presented quite a tension for this staff member who, while being requested by students to design for e-learning, was herself unresolved about the authenticity of such a remote approach to interaction. One suggestion for this staff member was to consider what the technology can do to assist the assessment process - perhaps in supporting students before and after their assignment is submitted, rather than distracting from the key component of the interpersonal task itself. Her resolution to this issue was a decision to pilot an online assessment design with a small number of student volunteers in the near future.

The questions of scalability were evident in the case of first year student group (such as the first year sports psychology subject which was not developed for online assessment) where close facilitation of discussion was thought to be difficult to sustain. Conversely, the absence of a critical mass was thought to be a disincentive to interaction in the sociology subject. Overlooked in this case was the published evidence that students in the social sciences, especially those with previous exposure to e-learning, are motivated and supported by dialogue online, whether moderated or unmoderated (O'Reilly & Newton, 2002). The question is how can we most usefully support these self-directed learners through appropriate pedagogy and effective use of technology.

Elements of an answer to this question lie in the detailed provision of marking criteria where the students can engage with specific requirements of the assessable tasks when these are fully transparent. In the case of unmoderated (and ungraded) discussions, students seem to gain enormous benefit from dialogue with their peers on what is expected by the assignment and how to proceed towards its completion. In such cases interpersonal support is often provided among student peers enabling an independence from the support of staff, as in Talil's situation.

The action learning approach to educational design as described in this case study has reinforced the small Web-based survey conducted with four dual-mode regional universities which revealed that those who implement online assessment believed in the benefits of e-learning in their subject areas and they implemented their ideas regardless of the lack of institutional supports provided (particularly in not being given release time for designing and developing their innovations).

The use of action learning sets to replace the conventional one-to-one approach to educational design was adopted in this research to provide collegiality, and enhance the creativity and reflexive potentials of the design process and to throw light on the cyclical nature of effective design. The cross-disciplinary nature of this learning set has effectively moved participants from going around in circles and into a place for change and improvement, through the sharing of a diversity of experiences and disciplinary perspectives. Collegial approaches to strategic thinking and problem solving also seeded reflections by both academic and non-academic staff in terms of the global imperatives of integrating technology in teaching. Plans are now afoot for a transcultural discussion in corporate accounting, a pilot project for assessment and support of athlete clients using the online environment, the greater use of unmoderated discussions with social science students to support their progress and provide opportunities for exchange of diverse perspectives, and the reduction of paper use and postage costs through increased implementation of electronic assignment submission, on-screen marking and feedback for overseas students.

Another beneficial outcome of using an action learning cycle for reflection on educational design has been the inclusion of evaluation data to complete the information loop on how proposed designs were implemented or not, the reasons why as well as any feedback provided by students. This reflection has led to improved scholarship of teaching through several publications of reflections on innovations from members of this set. The plan-act-observe-reflect elements of action research are thus represented by the design, implementation, reflection (publication) and evaluation phases of this case study. Further action learning cycles are planned and the next of these has now begun, spiralling on from the first.

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