Online teaching

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project

Contents

1. Introduction

This section encompasses a whole range of teaching involving, in varying degrees, online learning. Most online or e-learning in higher education is used as part of a varied teaching package including face-to-face teaching. Where courses are taught wholly online there can be additional challenges for building teaching relationships and motivating students (Chena et al, 2008; Wang et al, 2007).

There is a wealth of information available about online or virtual learning environments (VLE) and elements of effective practice described in that information also apply to teaching international students. However, there are some particular aspects of VLE or online learning that either provide specific difficulties for international students or can be used to create opportunities for more effective teaching for international students when online learning takes their needs into account. In well-designed and delivered online courses and VLEs, cultural boundaries and 'differences' amongst students 'disappear'; everyone is 'international'.

2. The main issues: getting started

2.1 Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

Web 2.0 technologies and the growth of different types of off-shore courses provide opportunities for new types of learning. West (2010) points out that 'Web 2.0 technologies have allowed individuals to connect in real time to others anywhere in the world' and, as 'formal and traditional boundaries are becoming more permeable and porous', higher education institutions are using multiple technologies to facilitate, complement and support international experience and intercultural connections. Many courses now use VLEs (such as Blackboard) as a routine part of their teaching and learning approach to post content and to host student portfolios or online discussion groups.

As the Internet and social media increasingly allow education to supersede geographic boundaries, colleagues and classmates may very well be on the other side of the world. In addition to helping internationalise the curriculum and facilitate research collaboration, technology has also made international experience much more accessible to students unable to study abroad because of limited financial resources or time. (West, 2010)

Collaborative online learning can lead to shared experiences and new ideas for teachers and students alike. However, there may be disparities between the students in the skills they bring with them as they start their studies and in their motivations with taking up and exploring online technologies.

Teachers cannot assume that all students are used to using social networking software and VLEs (Gray, Chang & Kennedy, 2010). Further, Gray et al. (2010) argue that students do not have expectations that online learning can be used to develop intercultural competencies. This perhaps places the emphasis of meeting the needs of diverse learners in a digital age firmly on the shoulders of teachers, at least in the initial stages of learning. This could alternatively be seen as a new opportunity for using multimedia and asynchronous communication to create new ways for students to exchange their diverse experiences and perspectives for mutual learning.

Conversely many students now have very advanced computer and social networking knowledge and skills and often have contact with people all over the world. In many ways, students now are more 'internationalised' and information-savvy than their lecturers and navigate worldwide information sources effortlessly. International students can also often be much more 'internationalised' in this sense than their UK counterparts, who are notoriously less mobile.

Hannon and D'Netto (2007) found that local English-speaking students report greater satisfaction with online learning than international students however other studies have found no differences. Hannon and D'Netto's

study suggested that students can find it difficult to make positive connections with other students online with just over 50 percent of the students in their study reporting that they do not have good communication with students from other cultural backgrounds; this echoes much of the literature pointing to difficulties in communication in other modes of learning. There is further information and guidance available in the 'Intercultural competences' section of this resource bank.

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. Others say however that they can feel intimidated by the longer and more articulate or sophisticated posts of local students. Careful moderation of online posts and discussions can help to 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. Expectations around requirements and online behaviour can be outlined in a welcome email or post from the tutor and through careful and sensitive intervention by the tutor when necessary.

2.2 Online group work / networked learning

The most significant finding of an early study of intercultural issues in networked learning by Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder & Roche (2002) was that '"cyberspace" itself has a culture, and is not simply a neutral and value-free platform for exchange'. In negotiating these 'cultures' group members have to face the risk of miscommunication if postings are seemingly misinterpreted. Not having non-verbal cues to intuit meanings and not being able to 'give and save face' so easily when working online are particular challenges.

To tackle some of these issues practitioners can help by making explicit some of the 'rules' of online group work. These could be created by each group and may include:

- the use of greetings

- formality/informality of postings

- whether relationship-building communications are encouraged as well as on-task communications

- 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

3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

- Try to monitor the levels of participation by individual students and provide encouragement or prompts when necessary. You can ask that all communication about the unit or module be posted online but give students the option of making contact by email for more individual issues or issues of a personal nature. This will allow students to be able to approach you more privately to express any concerns they might have.

- Try to model respectful forms of dialogue and participation and address any inappropriate or discriminatory language or responses immediately

- Internationalising the curriculum to encourage an alignment with cultural diversity can work towards creating more inclusive online group working (McLoughlin, 2001) See the 'Internationalising the curriculum' section of this resource bank.

- Provide opportunities for students themselves to identify and post relevant sources of information or examples from their own cultural intellectual traditions or personal interests. This will allow them to make connections between what they know and what they are learning and will also bring a broader range of knowledge to other students. Posts can include a variety of resources including pictures, videos, media stories, articles, links to other websites or videos and even personal photos.

- Provide information about support available for developing writing and online participation skills (see Hannon & D'Netto, 2007).

- Post regular newsletters or weekly posts 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 to understand the bigger picture and the development of their learning which can also help to maintain their motivation and feelings of inclusion. You can also ask students to provide their own short summaries of readings, of their thinking or their own findings, and 'Eureka' or 'A-ha!' moments to increase motivation and collaborative learning.

4. Top resource

West, C. (2010) Borderless via technology. International Educator, 19(2).

5. What is the evidence?

Further reading:

Alexander, S. (2002) Designing learning activities for an international online student body: What have we learned? Journal of Studies in International Education, 6 (2).

Chalmers, L., Dibiase, D., Donert, K., Hardwick, S. & Solem, M. (2004) *Internationalizing Online Courses and Degree Programs in Geography. Position Paper for the International Network for Learning and Teaching (INLT),* Post-IGU Workshop in Glasgow, Scotland 2004.

Chen, R. T. H, Bennett, S., & Maton, K. (2008) The adaptation of Chinese international students to online flexible learning: Two case studies. DistanceEducation, 29 (3).

Gray, K., Chang, S. & Kennedy, G. (2010) Use of social web technologies by international and domestic undergraduate students: Implications for internationalising learning and teaching in Australian universities. Technology, Pedagogy and Education, 19 (1).

Hannon, J. & D'Netto, B. (2007) Cultural diversity online: Student engagement with learning technologies. International Journal of Educational Management, 21(5).

Hughes, H. (2005) Actions and reactions: Exploring international students' use of online information resources. Australian Academic and Research Libraries, 36 (4).

McLoughlin, C. (2001) Inclusivity and alignment: Principles of pedagogy, task and assessment design for effective cross-cultural online learning. Distance Education, 22 (1).

Reeder, K., Macfadyen, L., Roche, J. & Chase, M. (2004) Negotiating cultures in Cyberspace: Participation patterns and problematics, Language Learning & Technology, 8 (2).

Reid, P. J. (2011) Online support in study skills for international students at UCLAN in *Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education* Vol. 3, (1).

Rogers, P., Graham, C., & Mayes, C. (2007) Cultural competence and instructional design: Exploration research into the delivery of online instruction cross-culturally. Educational Technology Research and Development, 55 (2).

Wang, M. (2007) Designing online courses that effectively engage learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. British Journal of Educational Technology, 38 (2).

6. Related resources

Chalmers, L., Dibiase, D., Donert, K., Hardwick,S. & Solem, M. (2004) Internationalizing Online Courses and Degree Programs in Geography. Position Paper for the International Network for Learning and Teaching (INLT) Post-IGU Workshop in Glasgow, Scotland 2004. (RTF 69.2KB)

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