

'Capturing the classroom' - A model for blended learning?

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This case study reflects on the developmental process followed to produce a range of tools both inside and outside the classroom to support student learning through blended learning techniques developed through the University of Hertfordshire's Managed Learning Environment, Studynet.

The concept behind the approach adopted considered the range of tools readily and easily available to less technologically minded staff and the comparative ease of use and additional workload.

This approach was piloted in a one semester Tourism law module taught to Business School students and following evaluation, further developed in the following academic year in a Public Law module in the School of Law. The author took over responsibility for the Tourism Law module at short notice and was the only tutor on the module and thus able to experiment in a variety of ways throughout the duration of the module and gain feedback from all students. In the Public Law module the teaching team comprised two tutors and the second tutor used some, but not all, of the "tools". The student response to the contrasting styles was evaluated at the end of the module.

The toolkit:

Each session aimed to provide a well rounded session to each topic undertaken through the module. Most of the activities were used in each session; video and formative assessment strategies were used as appropriate throughout the module.

Techniques used:

- Detailed module materials with lecture notes and seminar activities
- Power point slides uploaded well before the lecture

- an introductory short podcast to each lecture – 4-5 minutes identifying key issues again uploaded before the lecture
- A longer podcast against the Power point slides, either in or out of the lecture
- Hypertext links into key materials, both within the lecture notes and the reading lists
- The use of an electronic voting system (EVS) in each lecture and seminar session to check understanding
- The translation of the EVS questions subsequently into multiple choice quizzes (MCQs) available online
- A reflective podcast on key issues from the classroom following delivery of the session
- The use of a tablet PC in class to annotate already uploaded materials and thus provide outline answers as discussed to questions raised and seminar activities
- A limited use of video e.g a class role play then played back to the class with EVS to identify the legal issues, then posted on the MLE with MCQs
- Formative assessment strategies: in class and online activities – review and “mark” past student work against marking criteria and outline answer; write an introduction – peer review; collaborative work on seminar activities – group presentations, debates, role plays; analysis of previous examination questions and answers

The techniques used are all aimed to engage students in active learning (Gibbs et al 1984). Active learning is seen by the author as the key to successful student motivation. The use of a set of blended learning tools through a managed learning environment provides further opportunities for student interaction with the materials in a structured format with feedback outside the classroom (Salmon 2002)

Evaluation:

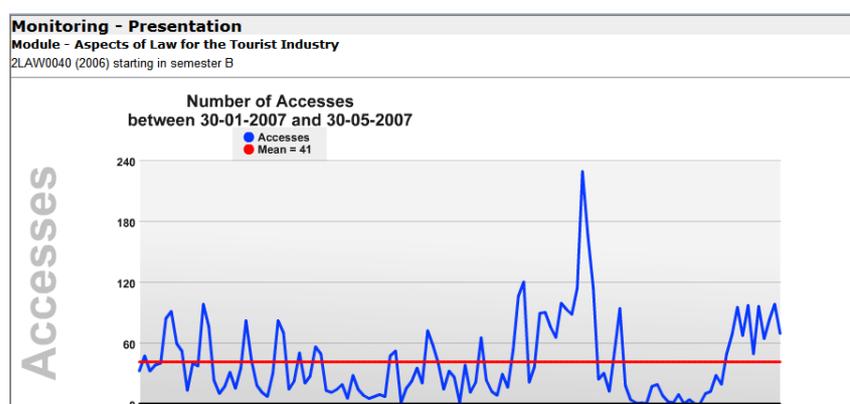
The author evaluated the student experience during the course of the modules and upon its conclusion. Observation was made of the use of materials on the managed learning environment through the staff monitoring facility; attendance records in class were kept and students were encouraged to “vote” in class using EVS on their responses to the approaches adopted. Additionally students completed an end of module evaluation and were encouraged to provide qualitative comments.

Students were asked to rank their preference of the different learning objects using a numerical scale of 1-5 with 1 being the highest score. This exercise was undertaken three times during the semester, at 4 weeks, 8 weeks and 12 weeks using anonymous EVS in class.

The learning activities were divided into two categories: in class activities and blended learning resources available through Studynet. The results from these questions in relation to blended learning resources were also correlated with the monitoring process of the use of the electronically available materials.

The monitoring of Studynet resources was conducted on a weekly basis. The most frequently accessed resources were the multiple choice quizzes (some students repeated these several times until they had answered all the questions correctly), the short podcasts (before and after), and the seminar answers. Extensive use was made of hyperlinked materials in preparation for coursework. All students downloaded the module materials and the vast majority also downloaded the weekly power point slides. Extensive use was made of past examination questions with answers. As can be seen from the diagram below the mean daily accesses to individual resources on the Tourism Law database was 41 (the cohort comprising 43 students) with evidence of much greater activity around the coursework hand in when the daily log on peaked at 239 and during the period leading up to the examination when the average in the week preceding the examination was over 75.

Tourism Law – monitoring across the semester



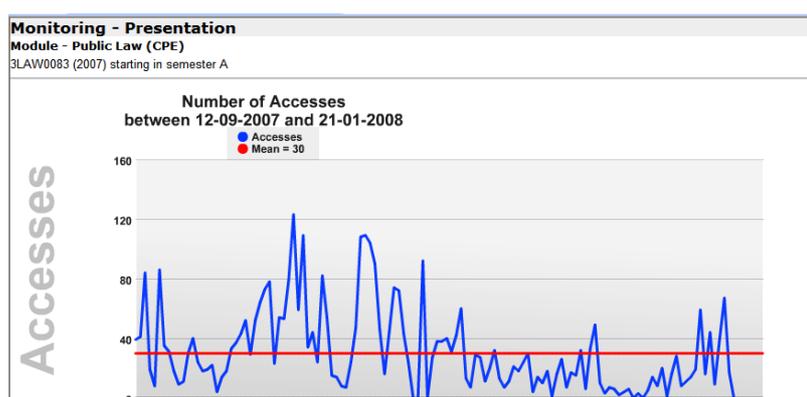
The questionnaire demonstrated strong support for the materials identified above available through Studynet. In relation to in class activities a significant proportion of students 72% prioritised as 1 (the most significant) all below:

- Podcasting
- EVS (this received a 96% 1 rating overall)
- Seminar answers
- Past exam question answers
- Hyperlinking of material

The clear favourite in class was the use in both lectures and seminars of an electronic voting system, receiving a 96% top rating. It was used collaboratively and individually. In lectures it was used to check understanding of previous underpinning material, particularly with a continuing topic and to check student understanding of significant legal material such as Regulations or case law. In seminars it was used to identify levels of preparation; understanding of case law and application of legal principles to particular scenarios; and to assessment of past student work as a formative assessment exercise in preparation of coursework and examination.

This toolkit was then used in the following academic year in Public Law. This module comprises students who are already graduates undertaking a law conversion course to become lawyers. The classes run in a three hour workshop mode and are highly interactive and participative. Again EVS was the great favourite. A few additional techniques were used with this module. Students were divided into small groups and asked to write EVS questions to test the rest of the class – this resulted in some very innovative and thought provoking questions. Students were also provided with scripted role plays which were videoed. The intention was to bring law 'to life' and to explore the context in which the legal principles operate. EVS questions were then used against the video to check students' comprehension of the relevant legal issues. As stated above this module was shared with another tutor and the monitoring of the access to blended learning materials appears below. The author was taking classes for the first part of the module and it can be clearly seen that student access to these materials was significantly higher during this part of the module.

Public Law – monitoring across the semester



The screenshot of Studynet above demonstrates student usage of the online materials across the semester with daily access (in blue) recorded from 12/9/2007 to 21/01/2008 when the module concluded. The red line indicates the average

daily uses at 37 per day. Usage peaked at over 120 logins on a single day and with evidence of significantly increased logins for the first half of the module when the author was taking the classes.

Student response to the techniques assessed through the questionnaires used on the same timeframe as in the earlier module and showed little difference in terms of student enthusiasm for the variety and range of resources offered.

Student comment from both modules indicated a very high level of satisfaction.

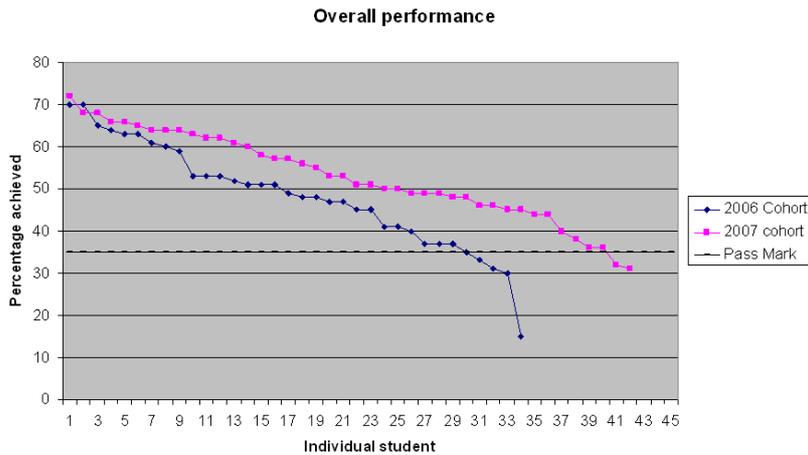
“I wish all my tutors supported us in these ways – this has been the best module I have studied at the University”.

“The podcasts and online materials were really useful. This is the only law I have studied. I thought it was going to be hard and boring but it was really interesting and fun.”

“You never quite know what is going to happen next in Penny’s class but it’s great fun and provides us with a wide range of activities, many of which support our personal skills development. I found myself in a play last week, though I’m studying law!”

Traditionally attendance on law modules in the Business School is rather poorer than amongst law students. In the Tourism law module attendance remained consistently high throughout the module with 36 of the 46 students either attending 100% or only missing one class. Attendance is not an issue for students studying Public Law who are highly motivated mature students who only fail to attend for good reason.

The performance of students in Tourism Law significantly improved over the previous cohort, though, of course this cannot be stated to be a direct result of the learning experience. Only two students who completed the module failed in one element of assessment. Analysis of the three previous years’ cohorts indicated an average overall 20% failure rate.



It is not possible to consider the performance of students in Public Law as the module was offered in this format for the first time in that academic year following re-validation.

Conclusion:

The author thoroughly enjoyed the process of developing the variety of approaches and this was certainly enjoyed by the students.

One intention behind the approach was to identify a range of tools which could be simply and easily used by other academic staff whose exposure to the use of technology in education had been limited and whose level of confidence was relatively low. This has been very successful, many staff are now using some of the techniques offered by the tool kit and a cascade effect is being seen as staff support and encourage one another in the use of these tools. The tool kit is not discipline specific and thus can translate across subject areas.

Reflection on the experience

- Attendance remained consistently high.
- Very positive feedback was received from the students.
- The author monitored the use of the electronically available materials. Students were actively engaged with the module and many learning objects had very high participation levels.
- The additional time spent by the author on the preparation of these resources was monitored. It was found there was a decrease in the time taken with experience and the exercises proved very useful in preparation for the classroom activity.
- Student motivation was very high and may have influenced performance.

This exploration was intended to be of general application to law and other literary based disciplines. The positive conclusions tend to suggest it has generic

application to disciplines other than law, certainly those of a literary based nature. The techniques used are adaptable and do not require a sophisticated technological background on the part of the tutor.

References:

Gibbs, Graham; Habeshaw, Sue & Habeshaw, Trevor (1984), 53 Interesting Things to do in your Lectures: Bristol, Technical and Educational Services
Salmon, Gilly (2002), E-tivities, Routledge