Introducing Online Learning in the Curriculum - Ensuring an Inclusive Learning Experience

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This article draws on the experience gained in the design and delivery of an Online Learning unit *Communication: Theory and Practice*. The unit is delivered to first year students on courses within the Applied Social Studies Programme (ASSP) in the Department of Applied Community Studies.

While practical considerations provided impetus for the project, the overall challenge was to ensure that the online learning unit would provide an inclusive learning experience for students in keeping with the learning and teaching aims and objectives of the Programme. The following provides a brief discussion of the principles and values that underpin inclusive learning and teaching practices together with practical suggestions for induction and student support. While the focus here is on the integration of online learning into a course unit for campus based students, and is set within the specific context of education and training for ‘welfare practitioners’, it will hopefully be of some practical value in a wider range of contexts particularly for colleagues considering, or embarking on the process of introducing online learning into programmes of study. A summary of key points from evaluation has also been included as these highlight some of the issues raised in the attempt to provide an inclusive learning experience.

In considering the introduction of Online Learning on a course for first year students in Applied Social Studies (Social Work and Youth and Community Work education and training) two potential benefits were immediately apparent. The first, was the opportunity for students to enhance IT knowledge and skills and gain the experience of using web based sources in their studies. The second, was the flexibility that the integration of online learning into the curriculum would provide. If used creatively, the conversion of course material to an online learning unit, would help to relieve congestion in the classroom and free up time for experiential learning and small group work by interweaving online learning with a programme of classroom based workshops. The opportunity for experiential learning (Kolb, D.A. 1984) in relatively small groups is an essential aspect of courses such as the *Communication* unit as the aim is to enable students to relate theory to practice/life experience in the development of interpersonal communication skills for professional practice. The erosion of opportunities for this aspect of learning and
teaching had occurred in recent years due to delivery of the unit to increasingly large student numbers - a factor noted by staff and students as a 'key quality issue' for the ASS Programme.

Recognition of the potential benefits outlined above drove the Online Learning project but careful consideration of further pedagogical concerns was required. In order to truly 'enhance the quality of the student experience' the online learning experience itself had to be inclusive and designed and delivered in accord with principles that reflect the 'value-base' of the education and training of Social Workers and Youth and Community Workers. Such principles are derived from the anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory values implicit in the promotion of social justice and inclusive strategies in the fields of practice (Thompson, N. 1997). The notion of 'inclusive learning and teaching practices' is of current concern in Higher Education. The 'widening participation' agenda calls for efforts to be made to attract an increasingly diverse body of students many of whom are described as 'non-traditional' either because they are from families, backgrounds and/or communities traditionally underrepresented in HE or, because they may have taken a pathway to qualification for HE that is not the 'normal' sixth form A level route. Underrepresented groups in HE include students from poorer backgrounds, single parents, members of black and Asian communities, mature and older people returning to learn and disabled people. While much work has to be done to convince members of underrepresented groups that HE has something to offer there is also growing recognition that if retention and success are to be assured learning opportunities must be sufficiently relevant to match expectations and meet a broad range of learning requirements. Within the Applied Social Studies programme there is a long tradition of working with a richly diverse student body representing a range of backgrounds, cultures, communities and experiences. This diversity of experience is valued and a premium is placed on student-centred, inclusive, experiential and interactive learning, teaching and support for learning. Awareness of the 'digital' or 'information divide': the differential and unequal ownership and use of new technology in relation to socio-economic status (Clarke, A. 2002), as a further complication of the 'learning divide' (Sargant, N. 2000), necessitates thinking beyond 'traditional' or 'common sense' approaches to the introduction of online learning. While much of what follows is simply based on well-established principles of good practice in learning and teaching, it is also derived from an attempt to acknowledge that, the implementation of online learning for a new and enriching experience, requires an introduction designed to meet the diverse learning requirements of all our students. The issues covered below are mainly concerned with access and the induction processes.

**Access to ‘flexible learning’ – creating a ‘Learner Profile’**

A ‘learner profile’ can provide important information that will help guide the process of the introduction of online learning on courses. (If online learning is to be introduced to a new cohort of students, and it is unlikely that the composition of the new student group will be significantly different from the current group, then a ‘learner profile’ can be created by surveying the current cohort bearing in mind that the uptake of use new technology is rapidly expanding.) Our experience was that the use of a brief questionnaire followed up with discussion with students gave an important indication of issues for access and induction. It was already known that the student body contained students from a range of backgrounds, many on low incomes, and it was important that the introduction of online learning would not be perceived to exclude disabled or poorer students. Consequently, questions were asked about access to computers both off (at home, at work) and on Campus. Feedback indicated that, although less than a third of the students possessed a home-based PC (reflecting national trends (Clarke, A. 2002)) and a small number said they intended to get one in the near future, there was a positive response regarding access to campus or work based facilities. The proposed online learning unit would not be a distance learning unit per se and delivery does not rely on students possessing home based PCs. However, one of the aspects of the flexible form of delivery meant that Online Learning can take place both on and off campus. A well-resourced computer ‘drop-in’ facility is available both on the home campus and on other University campuses in the city and there are accessible facilities, both hardware and software, available for disabled students. Disabled students within the group had good levels of access to computer facilities either because they had their own equipment, or
because they had been provided with facilities due to particular learning requirements. There were no reservations expressed by the disabled students within this sample group, but it was acknowledged that only a narrow range of disabilities were represented and that continued vigilance would be necessary to ensure that all disabilities would be catered for. (See Evaluation below).

Questions were designed to assess the level of interest and enthusiasm for online learning as well as gaining an indication of levels of both confidence and competence in the use of a computer for learning. As expected, feedback varied. A significant majority (46 out of 51) were favourable to the notion of online learning (‘very interested’/‘quite interested’) only 5 students said they were ‘not very interested’ with no one responding that they were ‘not interested at all’. A minority of students assessed themselves as sufficiently competent in the use of a computer with previous experience of accessing the internet for learning to feel that learning online was a real possibility (7 ‘competent’, 17 ‘able but need support’ and 27 ‘novices’). ‘Provisos’ to questions were built in to the discussion. For example, students who assessed themselves as ‘novices’ in the use of a computer for learning, were asked to consider whether or not their level of interest would vary if support were to be made available. This was important as some perceived a lack of ICT skills as a block. A significant number of those who did not deem themselves competent in the use of a computer said that they would view online learning more positively if both introductory and ongoing support was available.

This gave a clear indication that the proposal to introduce online learning was viewed positively by students, but also that the provision of a careful process of induction, together with a structure for ongoing support, would be vital.

**Introducing Online Learning to a New Cohort of First Year Students.**

It is always a good idea to let prospective students know that they will be expected to learn online. While the prospect of learning online and of using already accomplished ITC skills will be an attractive aspect of the course to some, others need to be prepared for what may be a new, and possibly daunting, experience. Information on online learning can be provided in the prospectus and on the Programme or Department web site but it should also feature in pre-interview information sessions and be included with the offer of a place and joining instructions. It needs to be billed as an exciting learning opportunity and most importantly to be accompanied by information that re-assures students that there will be induction and support available. Students can also be invited to let the online learning tutor have any specific information that might affect learning requirements (e.g. in relation to disability) and offers of email contact can help to reassure students.

**Induction.**

In order to familiarise students with available IT resources formal induction sessions should be booked with both the Library and Information Systems. Independent learning should be encouraged by advising students to familiarise themselves with the ‘drop-in’ facilities in the computer suite and collaborative work and peer support encouraged. Introducing online learning early in the course, during the Induction period, can take place in the classroom, using ACTIV Studio to demonstrate the attractive features of online learning, giving students lots of opportunities to ask questions- and have them answered.

The subsequent formal process of induction to the online learning course itself will involve two stages, the first in the classroom the second, a ‘hands-on’ session, in the computer room.

**Classroom Based Preparation for Learning Online.**

Firstly, in recognition of the fact that most student groups will be ‘mixed ability’ when it comes to ITC competence, the classroom based work must involve the careful management of a process that will be conducive to learning. This will provide a ‘safe’ and non-threatening environment where the ‘novice’ can feel both comfortable and also eager to learn and the ‘experts’ (or ‘boffins’
as one group of students decided to call them) can be encouraged to offer support and peer mentoring. An example of how this was achieved is outlined below:

In a class of 80 plus:
- Students were asked to think about three categories of competence in relation to use of computers and the Internet. They themselves came up with the three categories that they could happily use to describe themselves, these were: (a) ‘novice’, (b) ‘can use but needs support’ and (c) ‘experienced user’. Students were then asked to consider to which group they felt they belonged. (Interestingly, in the first year online learning was introduced to a similar group of students only 3 people put themselves into category c. These were the ‘boffins’; twelve months later over a third of the group identified as ‘competent’ or ‘experienced users’.)
- A class list was handed round so students could identify themselves and indicate their level of experience and this was used to create mixed ability groups of 15-20 for the ‘hands on’ sessions in the computer suite.

A smaller class group of students, 30-40, were able to carry out the whole process of actually putting themselves into 3 mixed ability groups in the classroom. Applied Social Studies students are very good at this kind of thing and the opportunity provided for independent decision making helped to create an environment conducive to the introduction of a new method for learning.

Online Learning – ‘Hands On’ Induction.

This session took place in a computer room, preferably with a computer available for each student. Preparation involves the tutor planning a script (or ‘lesson plan’) for the session by carefully going through the stages required to gain access to the online course- attempting to experience this as a first time user would. This allows a systematic approach and the sessions were managed so that individuals did not get left behind in the important process of ‘logging on’ to the course. A written guide for students is useful here but the most important aspect is ensuring that everyone is with you while, together, you ‘unlock the doors’ to the online course. Experience has shown that the use of peer support at this stage enables the less experienced student to gain confidence to access the course. Once they have achieved this they are ready to explore the online course material. However, a further mechanism is provided to enable students to navigate around the course and familiarise themselves with Web CT (the communication tool used in this instance) and its facilities- the Online Tutorial.

Web CT is not simply a medium for presenting text. It offers a range of ‘learning tools’ that, creatively used, can lend itself to an interactive learning environment. The Online Tutorial allows students to familiarise themselves with these. Before discussing the online tutorial itself it is worth outlining some of the facilities Web CT offers. Firstly, those used by the individual learner:

- a ‘customised’ glossary: This can be linked to course pages so that students can check key terms words and phrases.
- a notepad facility for students to take notes, make recordings online and keep a track of their learning. Answers to questions posed in the text can be recorded here and kept for future reference and revision.
- quizzes and self-tests can be designed for self-assessment of learning, and charting progress and for evaluation.
- The opportunity to create links to the University Library and to the Internet. This aspect of Web CT is worth some attention as the opportunity to create links exemplifies ways in which web-based learning can contribute both to the development of ITC Skills and the growth of autonomy and independent learning.

The feature of Links to the Internet opens up an indefinite range of possibilities for students to independently develop learning beyond the basic material provided by the course. This feature
also extends the opportunities provided by online learning beyond what is possible in the classroom. A relatively simple example is that students, while they are studying online, can make a link to related material on the internet. This can be facilitated through a link being built into the text of the course. There is also an in-built direct link to the University Library catalogue where students can check availability of recommended texts and gain direct access to e-journal articles. Links to commonly used sites such as ALTAVISTA or the Resource Guide for the Social Sciences (www.jisc.ac.uk/subject/socsci/) can also be listed in a Links section of the course but students will themselves extend this activity beyond the list of links provided.

Course pages can also be linked to each other so that reminders and revision exercises can be built in.

The following Web CT tools enable communication between the tutor and learners and/or learners and each other:

- **A message board** for group communication: Students can be asked to put responses to questions or to provide examples from experience/practice on the message board so that information can be shared.
- **An inbuilt e-mail facility:** this allows individual and selected group communication to take place. It is useful if a student wants individual tutor feedback on ideas eg for the assignment or advice and support about working online. Selected groups of students can also be enabled to communicate with each other via email.
- **‘chat’ rooms:** selected groups or pairs of students can arrange to use the chat room either with pre-planning with a set task or at random.
- **A calendar** for important dates and deadlines: this allows important dates to be notified and can be used in conjunction with the message board.

‘Online Tutorial’

The Online Tutorial was designed for inclusion in the introductory section of the online unit to induct students to the facilities offered by Web CT. It enables students to independently familiarise themselves with the range of facilities available. Students are asked to work through this as the first part of their use of the online learning material. The Online Tutorial is illustrated in the example below.

Figure 2. Extract from Online Learning Course: ASSP-Communication Theory and Practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Tutorial- Making Use of Web CT Facilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following table has been designed to allow you the opportunity to revisit the main facilities on Web CT that will support your learning. Please work your way through the list:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Calendar</th>
<th>The calendar will guide you and provide key dates for each stage and for the classroom based activities. Please go to the calendar now and make a note of the date of the classroom based activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Please find your notepages and add the above date and time to your notepad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Please find the message board, read my message and introduce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Board**

you yourself to other course members by leaving a message there too.

**Reference Section**


**Mail**

Please use the **Personal mail** box to send me a message to let me know if you think the course looks interesting! Any questions so far?

**Links**

Please go to **links** and have a look at the **SOSIG** website.

**Chat Room**

Arrange to meet a colleague or your mentor in the chat room: **remember** you must only use the chat room to discuss work related to this module. Please find out three things that your mentor wants to learn from this course.

**Glossary**

Please find the **Glossary** definition of **Communication** and make a note of this.

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**Ongoing Support for Online Learning.**

Tutor supported ‘drop-in’ sessions in the computer room were incorporated into the time-table so that students would know that further support would be available after the initial induction period. Students were informed that ‘attendance’ online would be ‘tracked’ and this was used to enable the tutor to monitor student participation and to identify students who had not accessed the course since induction in order to offer support and encouragement to those who needed it. (There is a facility within Web CT that enables the tutor to track and record student ‘attendance’, for a more detailed discussion of this see Kendall, M. (2001) ) A written note will be necessary to encourage these students as it is unlikely they will respond to email, and if there are problems they can attend the ‘drop-in’ sessions in the computer room with the tutor.

If students are encouraged, or even required to use email, then this is an excellent way of continued support being available. Students can use the email tool within Web CT to contact each other and/or the tutor. The Message Board also allows communication between students and the tutor and with each other. Both these can be used to support students online. Email support has proven to be a very quick and convenient way for students to access the tutor and get the help they need and has been used most frequently by students working online off
This was fairly intensive at first but it trailed off towards the middle of the period when the online learning took place. Most students settle into learning online and after an initial period of activity there is a lull in demand for tutor support. Finally, however, it is important to look at some of the issues that arise out of student evaluation that give further indicators for supporting online learning.

**Evaluation**

Student feedback and evaluation left no doubt that the objective, to provide the opportunity for students to enhance IT knowledge and skills and take advantage of opportunities offered through web based learning was largely achieved. Evidence was provided to demonstrate that the online learning course had made a major contribution to students' confidence and competence in the use of information technology for learning. As in Induction, students were asked in evaluation to 'self-assess' and to consider whether or not they had moved from one category of competence to another. Most students responded positively with a majority of 'novices' reporting that they had made great progress. A significant number of students did, however feedback that they would have liked more time in the induction process and this will be addressed so as a slower start to the course can be implemented. The second objective, to integrate online learning into the delivery of the Communication module in order to free up time and create opportunities for students to work in smaller groups in the classroom-based experiential learning sessions, was also achieved.

Student feedback indicated a marked improvement in the quality of the learning experience in the classroom-based sessions. Attendance both on and offline was good and participation levels in the workshops were high. The online style was commented on as being accessible, enjoyable to read, thought provoking, and informative. As many students have part-time work in social care and youth service agencies and one group of students undertook a Fieldwork Practice Placement immediately after doing the Communication unit, examples of the relevance of the unit to practice was sought. There was a notable appreciation of the practical value of course material. Effective learning cannot be judged on the success rate of assessed assignments alone but it was pleasing to see a good pass rate for the unit assessment.

The majority of students said they preferred 'mixed mode' delivery and some would like to see more classroom-based workshops. The small minority who would like to see the entire course delivered online as a distance learning course cited work commitments and childcare / caring for relatives as the reason for this. Flexibility allowing students to choose where and when they studied online was specifically mentioned and although the majority of students used both campus and home based facilities there were several positive comments regarding the choices that online learning provides:

"This is great. I can do it between changing nappies!"

"I really appreciate the flexibility as I am a carer and it suits me to work from home."

"I work part-time and my employers allow me to use the computer so I have been going online during my breaks at work!"

However, two students mentioned dyslexia and one migraine as making access to online material problematic. Further detail was sought from dyslexic students. This varied enormously with some dyslexic students valuing, for example, the opportunity to work at their own pace, to a small number of others who requested information to be downloaded and printed out. (Unless this is an essential requirement for a disabled or dyslexic student printing off the entire course is strongly discouraged as the style and format of the online delivery is specifically designed for experiential learning purposes, it is interactive and involves the use of WEB CT tools and facilities including Links to the internet). Online material had been produced to comply with BOBBY (see below) and care had been taken to take account of potential use by dyslexic and disabled students both
within the content and the style of delivery. However, it is evident that further consideration for the learning requirements of disabled students, will require continuous monitoring and review. It is essential to maintain vigilance to ensure that effective responses are made to student feedback when the need for change is indicated. At the same time, however, a proactive stance is essential for the adoption of strategies in keeping with the principles of ‘Universal Design’ - ‘the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest possible extent, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.’ (Center for Universal Design, North Carolina State University (Burgstahler, S. 2001)) It is important that this is driven by a genuine desire to ensure that the material provided is usable by all and not simply by statutory requirements (SENDA 2001).

In conclusion, carefully managed, the introduction of online learning can contribute to an inclusive learning experience. In this particular project ‘quality time’ was also gained in the classroom for experiential learning through the integration of online learning material providing an added factor in the improvement of the learning environment.

Kate Kirk is the Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Community Studies, Education and Law. She is happy to converse with colleagues about any aspect of this article. The CSLE Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee, together with the Learning and Teaching Unit, regularly arranges seminars and workshops on E-Learning and Pedagogical Issues.

Hypertext References:

BOBBY: Centre for Applied Special Technology
http://www.cast.org/bobby/

http://www.rit.edu/-easi/itd/itdv08nl/burgstahler

SENDA: Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001

Web CT: http://www.webct.com

References:

Clarke, A. (2002) Online Learning and Social Exclusion Leicester:NIACE


