ULSTER LEARNING LANDSCAPE
Faculty Active Learning Projects

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Title
Digital pedagogies and enquiry-based learning in group study context

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Keywords (Max 4)
Enquiry-based learning; screencast feedback; active learning; group work

OVERVIEW

Overview, Aims and Context (the rationale including underpinning pedagogy) (summarise the activity in 2 or 3 sentences, max 50 words)

This project examined the potential of implementing enquiry-based learning activities in a group work environment. By embracing the pedagogical theory of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003), the project also aimed to explore the opportunities for 'deep learning' via digital pedagogies and digital learning by using screencast software and the Blackboard learning environment to provide support and feedback on students' independent group work in an enquiry-based learning context.

Description (a brief description of the activity; and how you have used innovative pedagogies and approaches in the curriculum design; max 200 words)

The project was located within a third year module in social policy and second year module in sociology. Students were organized into several study groups with maximum 6 students in each. Six PhD students acted as group leaders whose role was to support the independent group work taking place within the courses.

Students were given online instructions (via Blackboard) to guide them through the group work, but were expected to organize their work independently. The project was carried out in three stages. First a more generic 'introductory' group based task asked students to think about the elements of a good poster presentation. The second focused on a specific module related academic question. The third, taking place over two weeks, asked students to design a poster on a specific problem and to present this poster in class. For the third year module this was part of the summative assessment.

At each of the three stages of the project, students were given general direction only via Blackboard. The final answers, or 'right' answers were not offered. Instead a wide range of resources of varied quality or relevance were made available, which students had to decide how to make best use of.

In addition, the group leaders were given detailed instructions about the desired outcomes of each of the three stages. They were given the delicate task of directing the groups to the end goal without interfering too much, through guiding questions.

Furthermore, feebdack on both modules was provided through the use of screencast software.

Design (methodological approach (qualitative and quantitative evaluation)

The project evaluation was intended to take place through surveys and focus groups. However, it proved impossible to recruit sufficient number of students to participate in focus groups and as a result, these were not carried out. The evaluation has therefore been conducted through short surveys that were administered to students via email. In addition the group leaders (PhD students) who participated in the active learning element of the project have been consulted for feedback on their experience.

RESULTS

Findings and Conclusions: (provide information on results/findings, evidence and conclusions)

Problem-based learning:
Our findings are underpinned by a striking contrast in the experiences between third year and second year students. Whilst students on the third year course (SOP506), for whom the group work counted for 10% towards their overall award for the module in question, embraced the group work activities wholeheartedly and contributed actively throughout the project with attendance levels of over 80%.

The second year students (SOC330) approached the activities in a rather different manner. Students enjoyed the problem-based learning activities set during seminars, however there was a collective hesitancy concerning the dissemination of the problem-based learning through end of term presentations and posters. Instead, students wanted an assessment activity more closely aligned to the tasks they were set in the seminar.

This tells us that the motivation of students to participate actively is key when it comes to demanding group activities where high level of engagement is expected from all group members. As the group work for the year three groups was assessed and counted towards their final degree classification, they had a greater incentive to complete the tasks. In addition, it highlights the importance of a close alignment between learning and teaching activities and how these activities are assessed.

Screencast Feedback:
Overall, students received screencast feedback positively, remarking that the feedback they received was more detailed, focused and felt more personalized than written feedback. Many also commented on it being easy to access when needed. However, a general consensus also emerged from the input from students that screencast feedback works best as part of broader menu of feedback that includes written comments as well.

EVALUATION

Reflective Commentary (this should draw from your experience and identify what worked well and what were the key challenges;)

Problem-based group projects work best when they are incorporated as part of assessed work, which generates an intrinsic motivation for students to participate and ensure a strong end product. Students were asked to write a short self reflection commentary at the end in which they reflected, in confidence, on their own contribution and the contribution of other group members. This meant that those intending to free ride on the efforts of others would be exposed and their final mark amended. This seems to have been remarkably effective, as it appears that no group reported any issues with non-engagement of group members.

Screencast Feedback appears to be a popular approach to feedback for students as it deals with some of the issues concerning written or audio feedback. As the University increases its digital footprint, particularly around assessment, this is a key tool for staff to use. While the research team were social science based, the application for screencast software is applicable throughout the university and of particular value to distance students or those on placement.

Student Engagement (to be completed by the student partner): Impact on learning experience and sense of belonging;

Learning experience:

SOP506: Students remarked on the critical role of the instructor/group leader in guiding the discussions through questions and prompts. "The instructor's role was essential" was the quote from one student in the feedback. Incorporating the group work in seminar session was also received positively, as students found it easier to manage than group work which takes place outside seminars. It provided a structured time and place for the group to meet, enabling groups to focus on the task at hand rather than spending time organizing meetings. The small groups opened a space for students to ask questions and speak up more openly than in larger seminars. "Students who lack the confidence to share information in seminar would speak up.

Sense of belonging:

SOP506: The groups provided a more intimate study environment where less confident or vocal students found space to contribute to the learning process. Whilst students may feel more alienated within the larger seminar group, they reported that the small group environment facilitated closer relationships between students, and the self reflection commentaries clearly illustrated how responsibilities were shared equally between group members. Each group member took ownership over an element of the overall output. As one student remarked: "It allowed me a chance to get to know other members of the class"

Learning Environment and Engagement: your views on the appropriateness and effectiveness of physical spaces for engagement and virtual spaces to enhance learning.

Acquiring appropriate classroom space for the project proved to be a challenge, as each seminar was divided to a minimum of three groups, each requiring their own separate space. In the context of the project we resolved this issue by asking the group leaders to book group study rooms in the library for the groups they were responsible for. Whilst this worked well and provided each group with a study appropriate for the activity, this approach would not be feasible if similar group-based activities were scaled up at a larger scale.

The BBL virtual space is adequate for the task – providing information and links to relevant information that acts as prompts for independent learning – but based on the experiences around this project we would strongly recommend exploring alternative options. The BBL learning spaces remain rather unimaginative and far removed from the types of virtual spaces students otherwise engage in (websites and social media platforms). As a consequence, BBL seems destined remain a mere information hub.

Impact (please provide evidence of the impact on learning and/or teaching)

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Transferability (consider how this activity might be used by colleagues in other schools/faculties and if it could be developed for a further Faculty interdisciplinary learning project)

Independent, problem-based group learning holds great potential but to carry this out successfully, the pilot would suggest that this requires both resources (group leaders) and clear outcomes (e.g. assessed work contributing to overall degree).

In terms of a larger scale Faculty interdisciplinary learning project, one could foresee a Faculty-wide initiative where students were invited to participate in student-led research projects. Over two week period (outside of normal teaching) students would be offered the opportunity to carry out a small-scale research project in mixed groups (the groups would be kept as heterogeneous as possible in

terms of disciplinary backgrounds) on a broad topic (e.g. sustainability, diversity etc.). Groups, with guidance from group leaders, would have to come up with a specific theme and research question relating to the overall topic and then carry out data collection (literature review, document analysis, interviews, survey) to answer the question. The two weeks would conclude with a small conference where best papers/presentations would be awarded prizes. Such project could be linked to both employability and active learning.

Two specific opportunities come to mind. One would be around Brexit – to ask students to come up with critical questions about their futures that concern the way in which the Brexit negotiations are likely to impact on their lives. This could be start of a Northern Irish conversation within the initiatives to bring the millennial voice into the Brexit debate, such as https://generationbrexit.crowdicity.com/

The second opportunity can be identified around the notion of Ulster as a civic university, which by definition is one that is anchored in the communities where it is located. Student could work within local communities on locally relevant social problems and carry out short research projects that address them in some way.

Dissemination (internal and external) (School and Faculty briefings, workshops, resources developed)

Our intention is to share findings and feedback widely with colleagues within our School. This will be achieved through presenting findings in a seminar format in the next academic semester (possibly as part of the 'Pushing Boundaries' seminar series within the School. We will also offer to facilitate a workshop to support any colleague who may wish to incorporate similar problem-based approaches or online platforms in their teaching.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

References (using Harvard style, list literature and other resources that influenced your work)

Acknowledgements (support staff or departments that supported you detailing specific areas of assistance and contact details)

Carol Morley, SPCSP

Attachments List and attach relevant documents/images in support of project activities