JISC

Case study 3: Students as partners in blending learning

University of Wolverhampton

What this case study covers

- **Subject and level:** Higher education undergraduate students in health, computing and cultural studies

- **Topic:** Redefining the traditional relationship between students and staff to develop student-led support mechanisms using social media

- **Technologies used:** Facebook™, blog, Twitter®, PebblePad personal learning system

Background

The University of Wolverhampton has a student population of just under 24,000 (November 2010) studying in eight academic schools covering the subject disciplines of education; health and wellbeing; law, social sciences and communications; technology; business; applied sciences; sport, performing arts and leisure; and art and design. Almost two-thirds (59%) of students study full-time, with 41% studying part-time.

There are four campuses, in Wolverhampton, Compton Park, Telford and Walsall, and the university also has its School of Health and Wellbeing in Burton and a Science Park in Wolverhampton.

The university attracts a diverse student population that is multi-cultural and multi-faith. Endeavours to widen participation have been successful: many students are the first generation in their families to enter higher education, and there has been growth in representation from communities where participation has traditionally been low.

Vision

At the University of Wolverhampton, students are working in partnership with practitioners to develop and deliver blended learning. Redefining the traditional relationship between student and practitioner, this innovative approach offers

challenges and risks but also provides increased opportunities to empower students and create an exciting and inclusive approach to learning.

Staff and 350 undergraduate students across three modules in health, computing and cultural studies have been participating in a pilot study to investigate new solutions to persistent issues in the blending of learning (Melville, 2009): inconsistent integration of technology in higher education courses (Sharpe et al, 2006), how to exploit the potential of ever-changing technologies, and the need to develop an inclusive pedagogical strategy to benefit from the skills of students (Hocking, 2010).

Transforming practice

Piloting the role of student partners

Students from the three modules were invited to apply for the role of student partner to lead an exploration into how learning may be enhanced using freely available software. Seven students were appointed; each was given an honorarium at the end of the module.

Four principles were established to help shift the locus of control from the institution to the student partners:

- The choice and ownership of the technologies should be determined by the student partners.
- The choice should be made from freely available technologies that students understand.
- The decisions about how the technologies are used should be jointly determined by the student partners and academic staff.
- Student partners taking on the role should be incentivised in some way.

All student partners set up Facebook groups as hubs to support peer learning, with each group establishing its own hub. Facebook groups permit individual privacy and support information sharing via the Facebook Wall, discussions, sharing of links and videos, and synchronous (real-time, text-based) chat.

Two groups invited staff to join the site, one excluded them. Over the three modules, staff and students encouraged class members to join the Facebook groups at face-to-face sessions; around 50% of the students signed up.

The approaches and energies of the student partners also varied according to the context of the modules. Activities led by student partners, with which peers engaged, included posting additional subject information, outlining their interactions with module leaders, seeking feedback from peers about learning issues to share with lecturers and making notes available, which included one instance of creating formative assessment questions and feedback with the module leader.

Analysis of the groups' Walls also showed very rich exchanges and debate on topics from modules, relating the discussions to information from other sources and contemporary events. The extent of use of Facebook and the extent of interaction varied across the disciplines, with cultural studies showing the highest engagement.

A blog was used to distribute learning materials, some of which were written and researched by the student partners. Technologies such as Twitter, e-portfolios and other social media were also explored for their potential to support students' learning.

Student and staff collaboration

Student partners taking the health and disease module worked with the module tutor to create multiple choice questions for their module. The questions were created in Microsoft® Word® and uploaded to a blog site (Facebook doesn't support uploading Word documents); a link was provided to these via Facebook. Answers to the questions were posted a week later. This process illustrates the partnership relationship well: student partners defined the need and supplied the technical expertise, while the module tutor provided academic expertise and quality assurance for the formative assessment activity.

Improving communication between students and staff

The students on each of the three modules partnered with staff in different ways, using email, the telephone and meetings at different frequencies (from weekly to ad hoc). There were instances of student partners mediating between peers and academic teams to highlight areas where students had misunderstood key learning points or required further support. Two-way communication between students and staff was seen as valuable by all.

Supporting staff in use of social software

The growth in ownership of personal technologies means that many students have ready access to portable devices and are proficient in using these to socialise and to

access information as part of their everyday lives. In bringing together students and staff, the university sought to benefit from this proficiency and support academic staff to investigate new and engaging approaches to learning and teaching that reflects the expectations of this new generation of learners.

Benefits

The student partner project provided additional learning support for students and a greater insight into how to harness the capacity of new technologies to support and stimulate collaborative learning, interactive content generation and content sharing. An analysis of the interactions in the pilot reveals seven beneficial behaviours that students engaged in:

- Creating, extending and sharing module learning content using freely available software; for example, a glossary of complex terms was created and shared using a blog site.

- Mediating between students and staff; for example, requests for additional information where some students had not fully understood a concept. This was particularly beneficial for students not confident enough to ask questions during lectures.

- Peer support that filled gaps in other students' knowledge or understanding.

- Peer support that addressed administrative needs such as providing details on submission requirements or announcements.

- The creation of formative assessment learning activities with feedback.

- Helping peers (for example, peers who had missed sessions or were having difficulty finding or understanding key information, or who needed reminding of assignment submission dates) and motivating and supporting each other.

- Sharing ideas about how to learn and feeding these ideas into discussions with academic staff.

Students who were unwell and missed lectures found the additional resources and support useful, and others found it helpful for revision purposes.

Although the sample is comparatively small, an analysis of the findings so far indicates increased engagement and student achievement, with pass rates for two modules being 10% higher than the previous year. Another outcome is improved attendance once the student partners began work.

Using established social software such as Facebook means that responsibility for the technical aspects is largely taken away from the staff and the university: students are familiar with the technology, require little support, and much of the support they do require is provided by peers.

There may be cost benefits in using freely available software such as Facebook, as there are no licences and no software or hardware support costs, and the pervasive and intuitive nature of the technology means that (as noted above) little or no training is required.

Partnering students and academics has helped enrich the blending of learning by providing extra skilled resource to support members of staff who are unfamiliar with or not confident about using new and emerging technologies. This form of collaboration makes productive use of the technological habits of learners and facilitates a fresh and engaging approach to learning and teaching that is informed by student behaviours.

Useful to know

- There are ethical issues to consider, such as that selected student partners tend to achieve some of the highest grades, possibly because they engage more deeply with the learning.

- The pilot study involved staff who were supportive and open to the project's aims. Securing the buy-in of all stakeholder groups is important if you are considering wide-scale adoption of this approach.

- Institutions need to consider how they will support students, some of whom may have less well-developed digital literacy skills, to acquire appropriate skills.

- Providers who work with 14–19 age groups or vulnerable learners will need to consider safeguarding aspects.

- An introductory workshop for students and staff can facilitate effective working and raise pedagogical awareness.

- Guidelines may help to address potential issues such as accuracy in student-generated content.

Moving forward

By harnessing the knowledge, skills and abilities of students in their use of social software, staff have begun to address some of the challenges in integrating technology and are overcoming barriers of time and understanding to develop inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Further research is needed to consolidate the early findings and to explore how well the approach works in different curriculum areas.

Learner perspective

Students are largely appreciative of the role and efforts of the student partners, and have identified specific benefits such as:

> *"Being able to ask any questions I had and learning from other questions that other students asked."*

> *"Facebook has really helped … because classmates have submitted questions and answers. There was a time when I got stuck with my practical write-ups, but Facebook came to the rescue."*

Tutor perspective

One module leader felt that Facebook had supplemented the learning on the module and had given him more of a feel for how his students were progressing. He felt that his students appeared more willing to raise questions and communicate problems or issues on Facebook than they were face to face. Another member of staff benefitted from feedback gathered from online activity mediated through the student partner.

> *"The student partners were most successful in eliciting for the class a list of troublesome points they wished me to clear up."*
>
> *Module Leader, University of Wolverhampton*

Reflect and discuss

The student–tutor partnership approach and use of social software changes the dynamic in the learning relationship and affords an element of control and ownership that students may not conventionally experience.

- Do you think that such an approach can help to explore new avenues in use of technology to enhance learning, unhindered by conventional thinking?
- Are there elements of this approach you would like to use in your own practice?

Key words

Blending learning, Facebook, social software, student partners

Links and further reading

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