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Interact with Puberty: Engaging middle schooling students through blended learning

ATEA 2009, Innovation Showcase

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Abstract: *Dr. Sally Knipe, Course Coordinator, Bachelor of Education (Middle Schooling) at Charles Sturt University has been teaching undergraduate students in this program for six years. When Charles Sturt University introduced a learning management system, Interact she, with the faculty's educational designer, Miriam Edwards worked together in developing new teaching strategies. The result was a greater emphasis on blended learning with student-centred approaches engaging students in both face-to-face and online learning. Two examples of such strategies are described in detail; The 'open wiki exam' and 'debating issues of adolescence'. Both occur within EED114: Transitions in middle schooling; a first year undergraduate subject. They employ authentic assessment tasks, collaborative work practice and social networking opportunities while providing a sustainable model for future teaching.*

Keywords: *blended learning, wiki, collaboration*

Introducing a Learning Management System (LMS)

In the Autumn of 2008 Charles Sturt University (CSU) introduced *CSU Interact*; a Learning Management System (LMS) based on the Sakai framework. Sakai is a world-wide collection of higher education institutions using the community source model of software development. The University progressed from the use of online discussion forums to *CSU Interact* in order to provide teaching staff and students with an online collaborative teaching and learning environment as well as support for research and project activities. *CSU Interact* also allows for integrated approaches to learning technologies within the CSU environment and promotes the use of technologies relevant to today's professions.

Pedagogically, *CSU Interact* supports a social constructivist approach to e-learning. Students are encouraged to become independent learners through problem-based and collaborative activities. The introduction of *CSU Interact* provided academic staff with the opportunity to develop new teaching strategies which included a range of online tools, such as blogs for online journaling, wikis for collaborative writing and chat rooms for synchronous communication.

Using blended learning to engagement first year education students

Blended learning is not simply the addition of ICT into traditional face-to-face subjects. It is about integrating the relative strengths of face-to-face teaching and online learning to provide a range of learning spaces where students can interact and construct knowledge. As suggested

by Littlejohn and Pegler (2007), blended learning might best be described as the act of combining and sequencing both media and activities. Blending online and off-line media may involve such things as audio interviews and print-based readings. While blending activities focuses on what students and teachers do and where they do it. These choices must then be structured in a logical sequence. The final selection of online tools, activities and the timing allocated is heavily influenced by the subject's learning outcomes and objectives.

The aim of this subject; *EED114: Transitions in Middle Schooling*, is to focus on the physical, emotional, social and cultural aspects of early adolescence and the associated implications in the context of education. Emphasis is given to issues relating to puberty, gender, and health with attention given to factors which influence adolescents' understanding of self. The pedagogical implications of these adolescent experiences are explored from physical, social and cultural perspectives. Students engage in learning experiences to assist their understanding of health and adolescent development from a range of cultural perspectives.

The integration of online learning through a LMS complemented with face-to-face teaching experiences allows students and academics to communicate in new ways. Students are interacting through real-time online tools such as chat rooms (synchronous), while also collaborating over a period of time through forums and blogs (asynchronous). Both formal and informal social networking opportunities are provided to students through small group *CSU Interact Project* sites, the more formal *EED114-CSU Interact teaching* site, as well as online communities external to the university. These are accessed by linking to current Australian media such as ABC and SBS television websites.

Two summative assessment tasks must be completed by *EED114* students. This includes an exam and an in-class debate. In making the transition to blended learning, these assessment tasks were reconceptualised to take advantage of the affordances both online and traditional face-to-face teaching offer. The results were an open wiki exam and in-class debates supported by online polls and project sites.

The Open Wiki Exam

Simply put, a 'wiki' is a webpage in which everyone is an author. This provides an excellent opportunity for collaborative writing. The word 'Wiki' is Hawaiian for fast, and is sometimes explained through the use of this backronym: *What I Know Is...*

Within *CSU Interact*, all students and the lecturer within each subject have equal access to edit or comment upon wiki page content. By using a wiki to create an exam, a web-2 version of the traditional 'open-book' exam is possible. If students are comfortable with the content of the subject's wiki, they should do well on the exam, which is presented to students according to university protocol.

The exam focuses on students' knowledge and understanding of all issues presented in the subject throughout the semester in relation to adolescent development and the implications of this on student learning. As with most exams the questions are based on subject texts,

lectures, tutorials, handouts and audiovisual presentations. But with this open wiki exam, the questions are devised by students, not the lecturer. During the first 6 weeks of the semester, 10 students are required to post one question each onto the wiki (found within the *CSU Interact* subject site) in response to the knowledge gained from the lecture series. This provided approximately 60 questions from which the final questions for the exam were selected.

By developing questions for the exam in this manner, students take responsibility for their own learning and become accountable to their peers. Students are also required to reflect upon content on a weekly basis, rather than ‘cramming’ at the end of session. The lecturer has the option of providing feedback by adding ‘comments’ at the bottom of the wiki page as the list of questions grow. The intention is to guide the students through the content as well as offering advice and direction on question construction. At the beginning of the teaching semester students are given the opportunity to develop their skills in crafting questions. Students are asked to consider designing various ‘levels’ of question types such as level one, level two and level three type questions which address a mix of theory and application. Question design is based on Costa’s (2001) models of intellectual functioning. Level one questions are defining, describing, listing, naming type questions; level two questions are analysing, comparing, contrasting, predicting type questions and level three questions are judging, analysing, speculating type questions.

Examples of final student questions:

Compare the similarities and differences in male and female pubertal changes. How could this have an effect on behavioural changes?

John Bowlby and Mary D.S Ainsworth believed that if a child is attached to another person, it focuses that child's attention on the attached person. How does this influence our methods as a teacher and our importance in helping a child develop positively?

Sally responds to student questions by adding a comment:

Some very good questions have been designed. Thank you to all those people who have put thought into the structure of their questions. We have a range of 'skills' required to address the questions including recalling knowledge and comprehension.

Table 1 demonstrates Littlejohn & Pegler approach to illustrate the blended learning experiences of week 1. Activities are specified as being either off or online with the responsibilities of both lecturers and students identified.

Table 1 (Open Wiki Exam – week 1)

Time	Mode	Lecturer activities	Student activities	Resources (Content)	Resources (Online tools)	Feedback & assessment
Day 1	Off-line	Divide students into groups, Introduce topics Give first lecture	Discuss topic and tasks involved	Lecture/guided discussion Textbook		
	Online	Monitor poll results Post weekly announcement	Cast vote using Poll tool	eReadings	CSU Interact subject teaching site - Poll tool CSU Interact Project sites for each debate team Library website	Poll results available
Days 2-7	Off-line	Facilitate tutorial – guided small group discussion	Research team topic and begin building argument	Textbook Library journals		Feedback from peers in lecture/discussion as well as small group
	Online	Respond to student emails Oversee activity in CSU Interact Project sites	Use online communication tools of choice (wiki, chat or email) within their team Project sites	eReadings	CSU Interact subject teaching site – announcements, forum postings and resources tool	Feedback from peers and lecturer via online communication tools

Debating Issues of Adolescence

The second assessment task within the *EED114* subject involves in-class debate sessions. The class is divided into small teams with allocated topics. Each team consists of six people, three to form a 'for' argument and three to form an 'against' argument. The assignment of speakers to positions of first, second and third is the decision of each team.

Debate topics include:

Young people, under the age of 16, should be subjected to night-time curfews as a way to reduce under age drinking and unsafe sex practices.

Low retention rates to Year 12 in some states and territories are as result of poor teaching and lazy teachers.

Middle schooling can not take place in traditional school structures that is K/P-6 Primary schools and 7-12 high schools.

The national targets set for Indigenous health in Australia will not improve educational outcomes.

These topics challenge each student to reflect upon controversial issues as an educator. These first year students, often straight from high school themselves, are beginning to construct their own teaching philosophies. These debates reflect the importance of group participation and preparation for the face-to-face debate is emphasised. Although each student must prepare his/her own speech, they must also support other team members to ensure their argument is strong and that each team member plays a different role.

Prior to *CSU Interact* students prepared for these debates in traditional ways. They met in the library or classroom and rehearsed their parts. The day of the debate would arrive, the lecturer would facilitate the debate sessions. Now through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous online tools students are developing ideas outside of class at whatever time they find convenient. Each debate team is given a *CSU Interact* Project site; which only they can access. Communication is supported through the use of a wiki, emails or announcements and chat room.

Reflection is an important component of the debate assessment. On the first day of class students are asked to complete an online poll which addresses each of the debate topics. Students must 'agree' or 'disagree' to each statement. Results of the poll are public and discussed during their second meeting, at which time the debate teams are formed. Students know from the beginning if they are arguing a popular or unpopular view. Of course, they also know whether or not they are arguing a point they don't necessary subscribe to themselves. After the final debates occur the polls are re-opened. Students once again vote on each topic and another face-to-face class discussion occurs. Students reflect on their own views regarding these topics. Have their own ideas changed over the course of their study? Have they convinced others to change their views? The polls also offer the opportunity for students to discuss the complexity of the debate topics and for students to express if they have altered their view and for what reasons.

Table 2 indicates Littlejohn & Pegler approach to illustrate the blended learning experience of week 1. Activities are specified as being either off or online with the responsibilities of both lecturers and students identified.

Table 2 (Debating Issues of Adolescence – week 1)

Time	Mode	Lecturer activities	Student activities	Resources (Content)	Resources (Online tools)	Feedback & assessment
Day 1	Off- line	Give Lecture Explain activity	Attend lecture Reading Reflection	Textbook		
	Online	Post weekly announcement Set up wiki page		eReadings	Interact subject site – announcement and resources	
Days 2-7	Off- line		Reading Reflection	Textbook		In-class discussions
	Online	Monitor wiki page and comment on student	Post to or read/comment on wiki	eReadings	Wiki Library website	Peer and lecturer feedback in Wiki comment

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A Sustainable Model of Teaching

The aim of the new blended approach is to provide students with a range of learning activities which also refine technological and on-line communication skills. Strategies such as in-class and on-line discussions complemented with readings assist students in developing their thinking around issues related to adolescent development. The *EED114* teaching site as well as the individual project sites are a re-useable resource. At the end of the semester students are ‘unjoined’ from the sites, the lecturer may modify the content and tool selection for the next semester when a new cohort of students will populate the site.

Evaluations from students regarding this blended approach found that this subject was very helpful in understanding the way children develop physically and mentally. Students commented at the end of the subject that they could handle the many different situations which may arise in a school setting. Students acknowledged that the subject content was interesting and well executed. The interactive nature of activities and group work was very stimulating and helpful in developing their knowledge and practice.

Final Thoughts

One of the greatest challenges facing university lecturers today is meeting the changing expectations of students. Subjects must be offered which allow flexibility in terms of learning opportunities. Student cohorts are becoming more diverse in terms of age and as a result they bring competing personal demands and employment requirements to their university study. Accommodating these needs is a necessity for universities today. Blended learning strategies which provide flexibility are a commercial necessity for universities competing in a harsh economic climate.

But it is not simply a case of doom and gloom. Lecturers who develop blended learning strategies also benefit from the process. Additional options for assessment which matches the learning activities and desired outcomes are realised. Subject materials published online may often times be reused in later sessions or for different cohorts of students. With lecturers from across the university and beyond sharing resources a cross-fertilisation of ideas is also a possibility.

With a blended approach to learning and teaching the student experience is all-important. What students bring to *EED114*, and any similar blended subject; may also be harnessed for future students. Often times a student will find a website, television program, blog or journal which they upload and share. In this way students leave a ‘footprint’, changing the subject. In this way both lecturers and students construct their learning.

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