Developing Independent Learning Skills for Postgraduate Students through Blended Learning Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Independent learning is a critical learning strategy in higher education, especially in the blended learning environment (BLE). This paper investigates the relevance and suitability of enhanced teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) activities within the BLE and evaluates how these can help postgraduate students to become independent learners at Glasgow Caledonian University. The existing TLA activities of Building Assessment module were reviewed, curriculum redesigned and constructively aligned to learning outcomes. An online survey was carried out to evaluate the appropriateness of TLA activities in developing students' independent learning skills. Students' responses on their preferences for module delivery were investigated. Success of TLA activities depends on students' experience and their familiarity with these activities. Most students agreed that, the use of formative assessment and learning technologies in the BLE was able to develop their independent learning skills; however these activities should be designed and structured properly, with learning supports provided by tutors.

Keywords: *Action Research, Blended Learning Environment, Independent Learning, Learning Teaching and Assessment Enhancement, Learning Technologies, Summative and Formative Assessment*

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is the fifth largest university in Scotland with nearly 17000 students. GCU is made up of three academic schools and has over 4000 mature part-time students, the largest number in Scotland. The students are from a wide range of backgrounds, ranging from the UK to over 100 countries throughout the world. The School of Engineering and Built Environment (EBE) is one of the leading schools for programmes in building and surveying in the UK. The School of EBE has more than 160 academics, with financial turnover exceeded £27 million in the academic year 2011/2012. The School of EBE is

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Scotland's largest provider of built environment graduates, and teach over 75% of Scotland's part-time construction and property students. In the academic year 2011/2012, the School has over 2900 undergraduate and postgraduate students, studying in nearly 50 programmes. The School of EBE aims to deliver the best student experience, by innovative teaching and learning, which focus on blended learning methodologies, and technology-enhanced learning both on campus, online and at a distance. This also includes electronic assessment submission and feedback and live broadcast and video of lectures and seminars.

The Centre for Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (LEAD) is a central and academic centre, to lead and support academic development and enhanced approaches to learning, teaching, assessment, participation and progression within GCU. The key planned actions for 2012-2013 include to provide support to staff to enhance knowledge, understanding and practical use of blended learning within their programmes and modules and to utilise learning technology to support flexible approaches to learning and teaching. The School of EBE has set up the Learning Development Centre (LDC) to provide services and support for students and staff. Learning technologists within the LDC support and assist staff in the use of web and computing resources, electronic devices and other elements of technology within their teaching programmes and modules. The learning technologists work together with the blended learning team in LEAD, to offer strategic and practical advice and guidance to staff in exploring the opportunities available for blended learning, and help with integrating and embedding them into teaching and learning experience within GCU.

SETTING THE STAGE

The term 'blended learning' has become increasingly common in higher education. Despite many researchers have attempted to define it, the term is still ambiguous. Blended learning can be defined as a combination of e-learning and classroom teaching (Steffens & Reiss, 2010), integration of classroom learning with activity experienced online (California State University, 2009), or integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches (White & Jelfs, 2003). It was also been referred to as particular forms of teaching with technology (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005), combination of traditional face-to-face teaching methods with authentic online learning activities (Davis & Fill, 2007), or a mixture of different methodologies, such as, learning and instructional technologies (Baldwin-Evans, 2006). Mason (2005) defines it as an approach to the design of learning interventions, using a mix of learning media and methods, such as, mobile devices and web-blogs, with the aim of achieving specific learning outcomes. One of the main purposes of creating BLE is to encourage students to develop independent learning skills, which are critical to achieve success in higher education.

Independent learning is an important learning strategy used not only in higher education, but also for the continuous development of writing skills for school entrants at the age of five (Girling-Butcher et al., 1991). It is neither a new concept, nor is it a concept where there is universal agreement on its meaning (Broad, 2006). The term 'independent learning' can be defined as "working with increasingly less structured teaching materials and with less reliance on traditional kinds of tutor's supports" (Moore, 1984). One way of effectively motivate students is through encouraging them to work independently and flexibly, for example, in a BLE (Gregory & Jenkins, 2004). Despite the flexibility and convenience of when and where to learn (Baldwin-Evans, 2006), learners have to build up their own independent learning skills.

The use of enhanced TLA activities, such as, learning technologies, to develop students' independent learning skills in the BLE was presented in this paper. A review of relevant literatures on the use of learning technologies in the BLE to support the development of independent learning skills was presented. The research methodology was selected to follow

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