Blended Learning Strategies for Engaging Diverse Student Cohorts in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores blended learning strategies within teaching and learning higher education as a channel of addressing learner diversity. Three case studies were critically examined to highlight the efficacy of various blended learning techniques to improve students’ learning experience. These blended learning techniques include online peer and staff feedback for formative assessment; online video and audio feedback for summative assessment; and a flipped classroom teaching model. Culturally, educationally, and socially diverse first year student cohorts participated in this study to provide insight into the advantages and disadvantages of each blended learning technique. Data on the effectiveness of these pedagogical and technological innovations were gathered through online surveys to address students’ reflection of learning experience. Findings of these case studies are significant in light of the growing diversity found within student cohorts in higher education; as well as an increase in technology-driven teaching innovation and student-centred learning techniques.

KEYWORDS

Blended Learning, Diversity, Feedback, First Year Experience, Flipped Classroom, Formative Assessment, Innovation, International Student Experience, Online Learning, Summative Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Transnational education has expanded significantly in recent time, both in Australia and around the world. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students around the world has doubled. In 2013, there were almost 4.5 million tertiary students enrolled in programs outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2016). In 2015, there were 587,365 international students enrolled in education programs in Australia, and of this figure, 249,074 were enrolled in higher education programs (International Education, 2016). These figures provide clear evidence that international students represent more than 20% of tertiary education students in Australia (OECD, 2016). The most represented countries of origin are China, India, Vietnam, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Brazil, Indonesia, Nepal and Pakistan (International Education, 2016). This is the highest proportion of international students in all countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) followed by the United Kingdom (15%) and Austria (15%). Australia’s share of the international student market increased from 5.1% in 2000 to 6.0% in 2013, (OECD, 2016). This makes Australia the third largest provider of international education services in 2013, behind the United States (16%) and the United Kingdom (13%). Considering the relative size of Australia’s population, such high representation amongst the international student market is indicative of the ongoing importance of this sector to Australia, both economically and socially (ABS, 2016). Given
the significant contribution the international student sector makes to Australia’s economy and society, it becomes increasingly imperative to ensure the future strength of the industry is an ongoing priority for the Australian government (ABS, 2016).

This blooming internationalisation within student cohorts is just one aspect of a vast array of learner diversity found within higher education in Australia. Other areas of learner diversity within contemporary student groups in Australia can include: learning diversity; social diversity; socio-economic diversity; and gender and age diversity; all of which need to be addressed in order to meaningfully engage students and deliver a successful learning experience. Blended learning techniques such as online learning, flipped classrooms and technology-based feedback models for formative and summative assessment, have the capacity to improve the learning experience of diverse student cohorts by providing a platform for academic and social interaction between peers, staff and mentors. Such interactions are crucial in ensuring successful and enjoyable student experience and are aligned with the ‘quality of education’ action area within the Council of Australian Government’s (COAG) International Students Strategy for Australia (2010–2014) (COAG, 2016).

The principle aim of this paper is to establish key areas of learner diversity within higher education, and present pedagogical and technological innovations that can be used to improve the overall student experience - particularly at a first-year level. In light of this, the ensuing discussion presents a series of case studies which investigate the efficacy of different blended learning techniques for enhancing students’ academic performance - this includes online peer and staff feedback for formative assessment; video and audio feedback for summative assessment; and a flipped classroom teaching model. The paper also explores key literature topics related to learner diversity in higher education including student-centred learning, blended learning, online learning environments, formative and summative assessment, peer feedback, and innovative teaching practices such as flipped classrooms, audio and video feedback, and video tutorials.

CASE STUDY ONE: UTILISING A FLIPPLED CLASSROOM FOR FIRST YEAR ANIMATION STUDENTS

In order to promote strong engagement with course material and interaction among peers, educators around the world utilise a vast array of teaching and learning formats, with recent emphasis being placed on student-centred learning (Aguti, Walters & Wills, 2014; Barman, 2013; Jonassen & Land, 2012). To achieve this purpose, educators are focussed on innovative teaching and learning styles - such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning and active learning and are exploring new technologies, such as learning management systems, social networking sites, video lectures and tutorials, wikis, blogs, MOOCs (massive online open courses) and OERs (open educational resources) (Vighnarajah, 2015).

In the notion of student-centred learning, emphasis is shifted from focusing on the instructor to the student, and ultimately aims to promote lifelong learning as well as independent and group problem solving (Hannafin & Hannafin, 2010). Student-centered learning promotes the idea that peer-to-peer interaction and collaborative thinking can provide a stronger knowledge base, as opposed to teacher-centred learning (Butt, 2014; Armstrong, 2012). Student-centred learning is a form of active learning which places much of the accountability of learning on the learners – students must engage with the topic and solve problems, rather than simply listen to the teacher. Rehearsal of student-centered learning has expanded from the setting of physical classrooms to the context of online learning environment.

Online learning environments have developed in scope, size and application in line with the continued growth of the Internet. From structured Learning Management Systems (LMSs), such as Moodle and Blackboard, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter to content hosting sites such as YouTube and Instagram, higher education institutions around the world have taken relevant measures to integrate online learning into their courses, utilising a ‘blended learning’ approach. Blended learning has become a key part of education across many fields (Pektas & Gurel,
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