

Formal Learning in an Informal Setting – the first semester student learning experience outside the classroom

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Introduction

During a visit to the Centre for Active Learning at the University of Gloucestershire by members of the Information and Learning Service staff, a common interest in the student learning experience outside the formal classroom setting was identified. Both universities were undertaking extensive work on their provision of informal learning environments and it was felt a joint project to investigate the students' learning experience and preferences would be useful to inform these developments with a specific focus on e-learning and active learning.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of new web-based technologies encompassing a whole range of activities from open access social networking sites to institutional virtual learning environments. There is a growing recognition that many students today engage with technology far more than ever before and much of their learning takes place outside the classroom in informal situations. The JISC publication *In Their Own Words* states "understanding the views learners hold on e-learning is fast becoming an essential requirement for institutions and practitioners as emerging technologies and ubiquitous mobile connectivity challenge our preconceptions about what e-learning means and how learners should be supported." (JISC, 2007)

It was recognised that investigating the student learning experience in general was a huge undertaking beyond the scope of the resources available, and the project was therefore designed to specifically address the experience of first year students undertaking their first assignment.

The key question we wished to address was

- How do new students engage with the learning process outside the formal classroom situation?

Specifically

- Where do they prefer to work?
- Who do they interact with?
- What technologies do they use?
- When do they carry out their learning activities?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted in order to collect a range of primarily qualitative data.

A large mandatory module was identified at each institution and permission was sought from the respective module leaders to initially approach the students during lecture time thereby attaining as large a sample as possible. The following activities were undertaken:-

- Questionnaire 1 was issued to students following receipt of their first assignment brief to ascertain their expectations of the learning process.

- Follow-up focus groups were held with volunteers to develop the questions further and elicit a richer depth of detail.
- Questionnaire 2 was issued after assignment feedback had been received early in semester 2.
- Follow-up focus groups were held with the same students.
- Tutor interviews were held to ascertain the pedagogic approach taken.

A total of 163 participants completed questionnaire 1 and 102 completed questionnaire 2. Focus groups were attended by 16 students in the first semester and 11 in the second. A demographic breakdown of participants in terms of age and gender across each institution can be found in appendix 1, however the vast majority (83%) of participants were aged 18 – 21.

Key Findings

The study yielded an overwhelming quantity of rich data and here the key themes and trends have been identified and are illustrated with appropriate quotations from the questionnaires and focus group.

Where do students prefer to work?

Unsurprisingly, the most common places cited by students were their own home or room or the library/study centre. Individual preferences varied with some stating a definite preference

“...corner of the library on my laptop – it’s the best way to do it for me”

“In my room as it is quiet and has most of my resources.”

However the study found that 76% of the participants used a combination of both the library/learning centre and their own home or room. In general students preferred to use the library when researching and gathering resources to inform their work but preferred to do the writing up at home.

“On my laptop in my room as I can focus better or in the Learning Centre where I have many resources.”

“My room – it’s quiet and an environment I’m familiar with. The library for any research needed etc.”

One of the key themes that came out of this question was the issue of distractions. There is an assumption that the “net generation” or “digital natives” are multi-taskers able to work anytime any place (Prensky, 2001), however many of the students in the study specifically chose their preferred work place because there were no distractions.

“My room because it is a private place with no one around distracting me.”

“...I prefer working in the learning centre anyway – at home I just do other stuff”

Students clearly still rely heavily of the resources provided by the University both in terms of physical resources such as learning spaces, computing facilities, books and journals, but also virtual resources such as the VLE, e-journals and e-books which they expect to be able to access from home as well as on campus.

A wide variety of learning styles and preferences were found and this creates a need for universities to recognise the diversity amongst the students and provide learning spaces which can cater for all styles from individual quiet study areas to informal group learning environments. (Oblinger, 2008)

Who do they interact with?

Individual preferences for group working or working alone were fairly evenly split with 43% preferring to work alone, 35% preferring group work and 22% indicating both. Where working alone was preferred there was a strong concern for many students regarding the contribution of all group members and the fairness of a single mark for the group as whole rather than being marked on their own contribution.

“We had a guy in our group – we did all the presentation – he sent us a slide on Sunday but it happened to be blank!”

“I prefer to work alone because that way you don't have to rely on others to do their part, if they don't your mark will depend on them.”

“I can rely on myself and know that I can put 100% into my work. I don't have to worry about others not putting effort into the assignment.”

Some students stated that their preference varied depending on the nature of the task, however many enjoyed the sharing of ideas and the feedback from their peers in group working:

“Working together allows you to ask each other questions about the essay and solve any problems you may have. “

“With others because it helps me to understand what the question is asking me, the types of things I could include and I prefer being able to discuss ideas.”

Both the modules in the study had an element of group work as part of the assessed component and in the reflections focus groups this was found to have worked better than expected by many of the students. The group tasks had been organized in such a way as to ensure an equal contribution from all group members and this was seen as supportive and useful:

“We made groups in the seminar groups....and then come back and read it out so that the lecturers can see that we know what we're doing, not just going into it blind and completely wrong.”

“... it was useful having someone else because you both come up with different ideas for the essay...”

What technologies do they use?

In the questionnaire many students provided very general answers to this question such as “a computer” or “my laptop”. This would support the finding that “technology” is very much taken for granted by many younger students and embedded into their everyday lives. (Ipsos MORI, 2007) There was also an assumption that learning resources would be provided electronically and use of the Virtual Learning Environment was somewhat taken for granted:

"I believe that it's the tutors not following through by putting it on WebCT that holds a lot of students back"

"...it's all on Blackboard"

Despite the widespread use of computers and technologies such as social networking and basic web searching, there is evidence to suggest that many students begin university with a lack of some of the information literacy skills needed for studying in Higher Education (Oblinger, 2008). This study also found a large degree of variation in the level of digital literacy possessed by the participants with some openly acknowledging their shortcomings:

"I need some lessons on the internet"

"I'm still confused on how to reference the internet properly"

Other respondents however demonstrated good understandings of the concepts of validity and reliability and Wikipedia was mentioned by many respondents as an unreliable source:

"I used the Library Uni internet resources because they're easy to use and you can access papers and type in key words...you know you're getting what you need."

"... you don't use the Wikipedia pages as a quote, as a reference but you can use Wikipedia to find something else...use it to find other things which were acceptable"

"I think that Wikipedia is really good but I accept that as far as writing this essay goes, you mustn't quote from it"

Computer ownership was not a question specifically addressed however the responses indicated a high level of computer ownership. Students do however still rely heavily on university provided computing facilities as many do not want to bring their own laptops onto campus due to concerns of security or inconvenience (JISC/Ipsos Mori, 2008).

"Then of course there's not enough computers so I ended up buying a laptop which has helped me a lot. I don't think I would have been able to do it without that"

"I just used the PC at home that was the main thing"

Despite the widespread use of social networking software amongst young people (JISC/Ipsos Mori, 2008, Oblinger 2008) the students in our study did not recognise it as playing a part in their learning, more as a distraction:

"There are so many distractions on the internet – Facebook!"

The use of technology for the sake of it was also a major cause of dissatisfaction for some of the students especially if they could not see the relevance of it.

"...we had to use OneNote ... it's pointless I could just do that in a new folder on a computer"

There is a wealth of current research into the student learning experience with particular focus on the use of technologies for learning and many of these are beginning to question the whole notion of the “Digital Native” and the assumptions about their experience and expertise in using technology for learning. (Kennedy et al, 2008, Margaryan and Littlejohn, 2008). This project has also highlighted a number of anomalies in how students engage with technology which support these findings.

When do they carry out their learning activities?

The majority of students participating in the focus groups said that they left the completion of their assignments to the last minute.

“I thought I wasn’t going to finish in time because I literally left it to the last day”

“Well I did a lot of planning but I actually only wrote the essay the day before it was in”

“It’s usually in the evening when I do mine and I tend to leave it to the last minute because it’s that contraction of time that gets me focused on doing it”

However, when asked what they would change most of them said they would start sooner.

This finding may support Prensky’s original claim that digital natives prefer receiving information quickly and are adept at processing information rapidly whilst multi-tasking (Prensky, 2001), however, it could also highlight the fact that many students have poor time management and organisational skills.

Conclusions/Recommendations

This study has examined students’ expectations and experiences of studying for and completing their first assignment in Higher Education. As a primarily qualitative study our findings are illustrative rather than statistically reliable however many of our findings have reflected current research in this area which would indicate a broader application of our results.

Recommendations

Information and Learning Services should continue to provide a range of learning spaces to accommodate all learning styles and preferences including quiet study areas, group work areas and informal learning spaces.

Where group activities are part of the summative assessment, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that all group members’ individual contributions are included in the marking process

Where a new or unfamiliar technology is introduced as part of the assessed component it should be relevant, embedded and fully supported throughout the module.

ILS and student services should continue to work together to provide a range of support activities and resources for new students to bridge the transition into HE. In particular focussing on digital literacies and time management skills.

Implications for learning teaching and assessment

The increasing numbers and diversity of students entering higher education is putting institutions under increasing pressure. Listening to the student voice is vital if we are to continue to provide the tools and facilities to support students in their formal studying whilst outside the classroom.

It is also important to ensure that learning and assessment activities are designed in such a way that students are supported and have access to the necessary resources to enable them to complete the tasks. To this end, academic tutors would be encouraged to work closely with Information and Learning Services who are able to help students develop their information and digital literacy skills and provide support in embedding technology in a pedagogically sound way into their teaching and learning.

Dissemination Activities

The findings of this study have been presented at the following conferences

- Worcester Learning and Teaching Conference - June 2009
- Information, Interactions and Impact Conference- Aberdeen -June 2009
- Association for Learning Technology Conference - Manchester - September 2009
- LILAC – Limerick – March 2010

References

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