INTERNET DELIVERY FOR VET SECTOR STUDENTS AT UniSA

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ABSTRACT

Distance education students in a B. Ed (In-service) Education and Training of Adults strand, traditionally serviced by standard distance education techniques, including print media and telephone conference, were offered the opportunity to participate in a new learning experience using the Internet.

A team of academics and IT staff modified a set of management subjects to run on a dedicated web page. The text-based materials were still distributed to students in advance, and an initial telephone conference was used to describe to students how the Internet delivery would be used, particularly the threaded web chat page. Written information was provided to assist students to access the Internet and the dedicated web page.

Initially, students were reluctant to comment on the chat page and then, very slowly and prompted by examples of hyper-linked web resources, questions and ice-breakers from the academic staff, responses started to appear. An initial web conference was scheduled for local and international students and students finally began to discuss questions among themselves and offer help to one-another. This was what the team had been waiting for, but it had been a long time coming!

Introduction

Late in 1997 several VET-sector distance education students had indicated a desire to undertake a Summer School of two to three weeks to complete a suitable subject during the New Year break, using mainly electronic delivery. These students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (In-service) in the Education and Training of Adults strand and typically comprised industrial trainers and senior training officers, TAFE instructors, nurse educators, armed services training personnel and adult and community educators. For a variety of mainly technological reasons this Summer School did not eventuate but the methodology was used during Semesters One and Two of 1998.

The idea of using electronic delivery in addition to more traditional methods of delivery was examined by the team and it was decided to run with it during 1998. To this end a variety of teaching and learning strategies was examined and the use of the Internet and email was considered to be a central focus of the program.

Khan (1997, 6) defines web-based instruction as '…a hypermedia-based instructional program which utilises the attributes and resources of the World Wide Web to create a meaningful learning environment where learning is fostered and supported.' The key point in this definition would seem to be the '…meaningful learning environment…' which may, or may not, be achieved in practice. To provide additional support in the light of Khan's comments, traditional course materials were to be issued to all students so that those who did not have access to the Internet would still receive the standard package, while those with Internet access would have additional benefits.

Students were advised that the program was really a pilot program for the purposes of research into identifying more innovative and effective teaching and learning methodologies. They were given the option of enrolling under a purely distance education program or, and in addition to this, utilising the Internet. The subjects chosen to be presented in this pilot scheme were Management Studies A (Part 1 and Part 2) over two semesters.

Background

The University of South Australia, formed in 1991, and its predecessor organizations comprising teachers colleges and institutes of technology, delivers its course offerings both on-campus and by

distance education. The School of Education provides a limited program in human resource development education, education degrees at various levels, and programs specifically designed for adult and vocational educators. Approximately two-thirds of the education and training of adults student body undertake all, or at least a major part of their studies, in the distance education mode and are situated throughout Australia and overseas.

Two academics comprising the author and a colleague, Fiona Underwood from the Adult and Vocational Education group of the School of Education, discussed what might be appropriate teaching and learning strategies to best meet the needs of students in existing subjects, when facing ever-decreasing resources and limited time. The two academics consulted a contract information technology lecturer and an information technologist for ideas.

This paper examines the processes used in the exercise; comments on outcomes; suggests areas for improvement and makes recommendations regarding the role of training for both students and staff members.

The Process Used

The web pages of other organizations were explored for ideas on presentation, content and delivery. The team wanted guidelines on 'best practice' internet teaching, but this was very difficult to detect from either the literature or the internet itself. As noted by Bannan-Ritland, Harvey, and Milheim, (1998, 77), '… many educators still believe that the mere use of this medium constitutes an engaging learning experience.'

In many instances an institution might place a subject outline and some background information on to a home page. At other times, the entire print material package might be loaded onto the web site for students to print off the materials. The UniSA team wanted to make inter-activity a major aspect of the program using as much staff to student, student to staff and student to student interaction as possible, but the methods noted above did not involve an interactive approach.

Visits were also made to some local and country educational institutions to see what flexible delivery methodologies were in use, but again, interactivity using the internet was not a component of the programs viewed. Furthermore, as noted by Bannan-Ritland et al, (1998, 77):

> While the Web can certainly be a powerful medium for instruction and an appropriate delivery vehicle for crucial course-related information, significant confusion still exists regarding the mix of potential media elements available in Web-based instruction as well as its overall potential for learning.

Despite the team's intentions to use a variety of media, no sure certainty could be entertained regarding the effectiveness of overall learning outcomes.

Team members discussed various possible approaches that would focus on inter-activity as a major teaching and learning strategy. The usual flexible delivery methods of the University were to be retained (see for example, Snewin, 1996) and Internet delivery was to be in addition to these using a 'threaded web discussion' page. With this approach, both staff and students could place items on to a web page for others to read and respond to (Snewin, 1998a).

The first student response arrived: "Greetings from Bonnie Scotland". Encouraged by this sudden activity, the team placed questions, advice on assignments, hyper-linked Internet resources, and specific subject content information on to the web page and waited, and waited, and waited for students to respond.

Apart from the energetic and Internet conversant Scot, himself an ex-teacher from the VET sector, it was some days before another student, a self-proclaimed internet expert from the VET sector responded from interstate.

Very slowly, one by one, students began to respond on the discussion page with comments like 'Hello, I've managed it!' There was not, however, any sign of student to student interaction and no responses to the questions and comments put forward by staff on the web page. Wild (1996, 49) supports these findings on the inadequacies of Web interactivity:

> …the provision of intrinsic and meaningful feedback using the Web is especially problematic - in this sense, the Web is not truly interactive and has no specific goal outside the goal constructions imposed by the learner.

Outcomes

Students were extremely reluctant to make comments on the Internet, but apparently used the hyper-linked Internet resource materials and answered the questions in a written form - but not on the discussion page! Some students telephoned to discuss the questions and others made comments about difficulty in using the Internet.

A student living in Singapore began using email to respond to questions. When asked why she did not respond on the web page, she said she preferred to interact on a one-to-one basis. This claim supported earlier research findings by the author (Snewin, 1994) where distance education students, in general, preferred individualised contact with their lecturer and preferred not to share that person with other students.

A joint Australian/American evaluation (Day, 1998) also discovered that students were equally reluctant to participate in two-way web presentations. Similarly, while presenting a paper in Penang, Malaysia recently (Snewin, 1998b), feedback from the audience indicated that those using the internet for interactive subject delivery were also experiencing student participation problems. Despite much prompting and cajoling, the UniSA team members could not achieve acceptable student to student internet interaction.

Towards the end of the semester, a web conference was organized and during this conference, students slowly began to chat to one-another as they would normally do during a telephone conference. They offered advice, assistance and support to one-another and a genuine interactive approach developed. The team was delighted and evaluation by participating students indicated that they had enjoyed the trial of the subject on the Internet, and were looking forward to other subjects being made available on the web in semester 2.

Staff Development Implications

The team reviewed the outcomes of the exercise and decided that both students and academic staff members needed to have some prior training and ongoing support if the use of the Web as a teaching/learning medium was to be effective. To this end, the following recommendations were formulated.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Participating students should be provided with written instructions on how to use Web-based teaching learning materials.

Recommendation 2

A telephone conference to be standard practice prior to the use of Web-based instruction to allow for better student to student and staff to student interaction.

Recommendation 3

Educational staff members moving in the direction of greater use of the Internet for both subject delivery and access to international resources, need training time.

Recommendation 4

Any program utilising the Internet needs to be transparent in its operation, lacking in complexity, and with all necessary commands being intuitive and/or clearly prescribed.

Recommendation 5

In the case of software, far too often academic staff members are provided with the latest version of a program when they were not really proficient with the earlier version. Therefore, greater consultation should occur between IT staff and academic staff to inform on compatibility and new version features, before any changes are implemented.

A thought for the day

Academics in today's universities do not have the luxury of unlimited time to stumble along the Internet learning curve.

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