

BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF EDUCATORS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore how the Learning Development Centre at City University London is implementing a module on technology enabled academic practice as part of a post graduate programme at certificate, diploma or master's level through which a creative online community of university lecturers is being developed. The module is embedded in the theoretical framework of Garrison et al. (2000) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and their concept of a Community of Inquiry.

Background to City University London and the Learning Development Centre

City University London is a medium-sized university which focuses on courses for business and the professions. Approximately 40% of the students are international, drawn from 156 countries. In common with other higher education institutions in the United Kingdom responding to profound changes in the external environment in terms of funding, regulation and accountability the university is developing its vision to accommodate 21st century learners and has long recognised that this includes the creation of innovative curricula and a strategic learning environment in which learning technologies play a key part.

Purpose and Remit of the Learning Development Centre

The Learning Development Centre (LDC) at City University London aims to support staff and learners through the creation of new and responsive learning opportunities. It encompasses academic practice, educational development and technology enhanced learning. At the core of the Department's professional development programmes is the Master's in Academic Practice post-graduate degree. Part of the underpinning philosophy of this degree is to embed the use of relevant technologies in the delivery of all the component modules. Among the important characteristics of the programme is the emphasis it places on peer learning and support. The programme is comprised of a wide range of modules including learning, teaching and assessment; student support; curriculum design, the use of technologies in higher education; academic leadership; mentoring; and

the undertaking of educational research. Since 2010 a new technology enabled route through the programme has been accredited by the Higher Education Academy of the United Kingdom. Students in the programme who pass the 30 credit module on Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP) and a 15 credit module on Information and Communications Technology in Higher Education module as part of their programme of study are awarded the Master's in Academic Practice (Technology-Enabled). This new route has been developed partly in recognition that, as a recent publication by the Joint Information Systems Committee remarked: "Learning technology is set to change both the prevailing teaching paradigm and the academic role" (JISC, 2010, p. 4).

The task for the Learning Development Centre has been to develop a programme that will engage staff with learning technologies and provide them with the skills to respond effectively to the challenge of this emerging paradigm shift. What follows is a case study, offering a model that combines pedagogic principles embedded in the social constructivist approach to learning design with the practical application of skills and knowledge gained from the module. In addition to awarding credit as part of a Master's in Academic Practice, the programme facilitates the development of a community of blended learning practitioners. The combination of a credit bearing award and a practical project to implement in their professional context offers a clear motivation for time-poor staff who want to engage with new approaches to teaching and learning, yet have to balance the time required for professional development in this area with the competing demands on the modern university career.

Technology Enabled Academic Practice Design

In designing the Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP) module the team has been mindful of the need to create a learning opportunity that offers both practical and academic support for a wide range of staff whose levels of technological confidence is varied. Also it has been important to design a curriculum which allows the flexibility to meet the needs of a diverse staff working in a range of contexts. In terms of induction, assessment, support and duration the module has developed on a different pattern from the traditional master's level modules delivered elsewhere in the programme. Building on a previous post-graduate certificate in Online Tutoring delivered by the Learning Development Centre, the TEAP module reflects some features of the Community of Inquiry framework first developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000). As Shea and Bidjerano (2008) observe, this framework "focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement" (p. 544). Although the majority of programmes delivered by staff at City University are based on a face-to-face model, there is a rapidly growing use of blended learning, with considerable variation in the balance of online learning and face-to-face contact. In terms of the design of learning activities and assessments the TEAP module

seeks to support and enable students to develop pedagogic approaches and implementation of learning technologies which are appropriate for — and relevant to — their own professional contexts.

How does the module facilitate these goals? To begin with the students are introduced to a range of learning technologies during a two-day face-to-face induction. These include learning to access and use a Virtual Learning Environment, posting messages to a discussion forum, setting up a blog in an e-portfolio system, setting up a social book marking account, joining a social book marking group and participating in an online video conference. Follow-up sessions in using these technologies are made available for staff who ask for them once the induction is over. Additionally, the class is introduced to some of the pedagogic principles which frame the module through an introduction to the first two units: Building Learning Communities and Learning and Teaching models in Technology-enabled Environments. Students are introduced to the social, cognitive and teaching presence model which forms the Community of Inquiry (CoI) as developed by Garrison et al. (2000) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008). The activities related to these units, which form the basis of the learning over the next ten weeks, reflect a social constructivist approach to learning and aim at first to build a social presence. As Garrison and Vaughan (2008) argue, “Establishing social presence is a primary concern at the outset of creating a community of inquiry” (p. 21). The students are invited to develop their social presence (their identity as ‘real people’) by participating in an initial icebreaker activity, through which they are able to share their academic and non-academic interests and discuss their expectations, anxieties and aspirations with each other. This is continued throughout the module by the provision of an un-moderated online cafe.

By encouraging the students to collaborate in this way the class is building on the social presence which was established at the face-to-face induction, as well as the ice-breaker exercises which were started there and carried on in the Virtual Learning Environment. The ice-breaker exercises include the opportunity for students to share a profile, interests, and their teaching or professional context. This social, collaborative aspect is further developed by the sharing of resources through the social book marking activity and assessment, which is completed mid-way through the module. Here students are required to curate a collection of resources. The assessment requires students to develop a social book marking network and to explore non-mainstream resources alongside more traditional resources. The kinds of resources collected reflect the specific interests of the individual student and are normally related to their final assessment. In this way the students (drawn from a range of academic disciplines and professional services) are able to understand and share ideas and approaches to teaching and learning that span diverse contexts and professional practices.

The students’ cognitive presence is developed through a series of small scale summative assessments which include posting to a discussion board, collaborating

on a wiki activity, and developing a reflective e-portfolio. The activities associated with these units invite the students to share and comment on each other's experience with online communities and their summaries of a pedagogic theory, concept or approach. The remaining units follow sequentially, with seven weeks allocated for each unit, all of which are conducted online, either synchronously or asynchronously. Teaching presence is established through postings by the module team in response to student contributions to the activities, (whilst respecting that these activities are primarily to encourage student contributions) and posting summaries or meta-narratives at the conclusion of each activity. Additionally the module team establish their teaching presence through management of discussion threads, provision of resources and formative feedback.

At the end of each of the six units which comprise the TEAP module the students are invited to reflect on their learning through posting to their e-portfolio. Unit three of the module has an explicit focus on reflection as a core component of learning and continuing professional development, and materials and theories on reflection are made available to scaffold the learning on this topic. As part of the overall assessment two of these reflections are selected by the student to be put forward for assessment. This constructive reflection, together with the collaboration and exchange of ideas, information and resources developed through all the units, underpins the cognitive presence on the module. Whether constructing a wiki or contributing to an online debate or video conference discussion, the students are engaged in "purposeful discourse to collaboratively construct, critically reflect and confirm understanding" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 21). Application of the principles and theories underpinning instructional design, e-assessment and evaluation are all captured in the final project where students can choose to develop an artefact, learning object, module or other use of learning technology appropriate for their own professional context. This assessed project, which counts for 50% of the overall assessment, also includes a reflective account that demonstrates how the learning on the module has been applied to the final product.

The third component of the CoI model, teaching presence, is developed in part through the design of the module. The assessed activities which accompany each unit are intended to give the learners the experience of being online students through introducing a range of learning technologies and activity and assessment types. The module team also facilitate these activities through weaving commentary in online discussions and providing a meta-narrative and summary of each activity, both through asynchronous postings and synchronous video conferences which are timed to coincide with the end of each unit of study. Those unable to participate in the video conference are able to access a recording of the session posted to the Virtual Learning Environment. All members of the module team offer their personal tutees support for their learning and formative feedback on their projects. In this way teaching presence is maintained at both the class and individual levels throughout the duration of the module.

Technology Enabled Academic Practice Evaluation

In terms of learning outcomes, the major focus of the module design and assessment is to equip the students with the skills they need to design and implement the use of learning technology in their own teaching and learning contexts. Thus far the cohorts who have taken the module have been comprised of academic staff drawn from several disciplines as well as Learning Technology and Information Professionals. The interaction between these groups and individuals, each of which is able to contribute a specific domain expertise to the class, has been one of the unanticipated benefits of the development of a learning community. Networks and contacts have been developed among the students that extend beyond the lifetime of the module. Information exchange, whether on appropriate pedagogic models, assessment types, affordances of learning technologies and instructional design principles, is fundamental to the development of a Community of Inquiry and the module has rich examples in each of these areas. Some of this information is captured in the end of module evaluation, which is collected and analysed in order to inform the design of the next iteration of the module. Among the comments received the following illustrate some of the benefits that students have identified as a result of completing the module

Students were asked to indicate one thing they will use or implement in their practice as a result of this module. Below is a sample of their replies.

Use of Moodle in academic practice which will entail use of discussion forums, wikis, quizzes etc.

I will continue to use my project in my workplace. Provided new insight into the use of technology in education.

My Project which incorporated a new method to related/link online content.

I have learned a lot about VLEs and in particular I have learned how to use delicious, Pebblepad (a personal learning environment), learned about avatars, and set up and run with help a virtual action learning set.

The students' reflections on their development are captured in their reflective blogs and provide rich information on how they intend on applying their learning to their professional context. A sample of student blogs demonstrates some of the learning that has taken place and the extent to which they feel they have developed a sense of community:

Student A: I am very pleased with how I have engaged with this module and believe that I have managed to integrate all of the knowledge and

learning that I have gained into the design of the project and this depth of thinking and knowledge has influenced the outcome... Undertaking this module has certainly helped to raise my confidence in my own ability to incorporate more technology into my teaching approach and to create more technology-oriented teaching aids.

Student B: I have just undertaken a brief 'interim' evaluation of the MSc module I used as a vehicle for my project and the students were very positive about the approach. I still find it hard to believe that I have managed to run a module using a blended learning approach when in January I had not heard of most of the technology enabled approaches used... I hope to stay engaged with the new community of educationalists and co-learners I have developed whilst on the module.

Student C: The knowledge I have gained in respect of blended learning is going to be a fundamental tool for taking forward my professional practice and developing a form of course delivery that meets the needs of busy students whose learning forms part of their own professional practice.

The feedback for the first iteration of TEAP, however, was not all uniformly positive and if there was one common criticism of the initial course design and assessment it was that the students felt overworked and over assessed. This in itself is a useful learning point for staff intending to introduce blended learning in their own contexts and has led to a change in the balance of activity and assessment in the second iteration of this module in 2011. One significant change in the assessment is the awarding of marks for participation in topic activities. This is in recognition of the amount of time and effort that students spend in researching and writing their posts to the discussion forums. This was a difficult decision to make. As Garrison and Vaughan (2008) noted, grading of online discussions "... provides incentives to participate ... The downside is that you are providing extrinsic reinforcement to what should be an intrinsic academically reinforcing activity" (p. 101). The grading of online discussions also risks changing the nature of the discussion as students may just do what is required in order to pass (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). We have used this dilemma of grading as a question for the students to discuss when they are discussing motivations for building online communities.

It is widely recognised that in order to meet the growing demands of students for more flexible learning opportunities higher education institutions must engage with learning technologies and, as a recent report by the Online Learning Task Force produced for the Higher Education Funding Council stated: "Training and development should be realigned to enable the academic community to play a leading role in online learning" (p. 20). This realignment represents a significant challenge for staff development where the goal is to achieve organisational and cultural change in order to transform learning and teaching practice. The work

undertaken on the TEAP module described above, which brings together academic staff and learning technologists on a shared programme of study, is one way in which City University is responding to the challenge. Although this is only one part of the initiatives undertaken at City to achieve this, it is an important one because it impacts student learning, models innovative practice, keeps abreast of current theory and practice and helps to establish, develop and sustain a Community of Inquiry.

Further research on TEAP will develop instruments and methodologies to cover aspects such as balance among the three types of presence (social, cognitive and teaching), the role of the online tutor in facilitating engagement with learning technologies by academic and professional staff, the impact on academic identity of staff engagement with learning technology in the ways they conceptualise learning and design curricula and its impact on their students.

References

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