

Using online learning alongside face-to-face learning

Name of the Author: Lina Khatib
Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London
Course: B.A. Media Arts

Background

This case study examines the use of online learning alongside face-to-face learning, i.e., blended learning, in the media studies curriculum. The case study stems from my intention to resolve a number of problems I encountered in my first year of teaching at the Department of Media Arts at Royal Holloway. The problems can be summarized as:

1. Feedback from students suggested that they prefer having lecture notes in advance of the actual lectures; this is especially the case with students with learning difficulties who made active requests as such.
2. Feedback from international students demonstrated that they would like to participate more in seminars, but that their English language proficiency does not allow them to do so fully.
3. Courses where students have to be kept updated about the latest developments demand a medium that can communicate information to the students in a fast, accessible and flexible way.
4. Students were not used to the idea of writing outside of assessments
5. Courses were more teacher-focused in their delivery of content
6. More scope was needed for the mediation of peer formative feedback by the students and by the teacher
7. There was a need to make better use of staff time with the increase in student numbers and growing pressure on lecturers.

The case study is based on attempting to resolve the above problems in teaching two undergraduate option courses: World Cinema, a third-year, two-term course, with a total of 15 students, and Television and Identity, a second-year, one-term course, with a total of 50 students. World Cinema is taught through a weekly two-hour seminar, and Television and Identity is taught through weekly one hour lectures followed by three one-hour seminars into which the 50 students are divided. Two different online learning software packages were used to address the problems identified above: The nature of the two courses suggested that software enabling access to documents (I used Learnwise) would be more suitable to lecture-based Television and Identity, as it would give the students access to lecture notes. But when the objective is to allow interaction (in the case of seminar-based World Cinema), an online discussion forum (I used PHPBB) would be more useful. The particular use of each technology therefore emerged from the nature of the courses, so the technology was used to enhance the courses, rather than adjusting the courses to fit the technology merely for the sake of it.

The key features and benefits of Learnwise and PHPBB are summarized on Royal Holloway's Educational Development Centre website; this can be accessed at:

http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Educational-Development/Centre/About/learning_technology.htm

Teaching methods

For Television and Identity, a Learnwise course site was set up. The site was divided into 10 lecture note sections, one for each week of the term, a section containing essay questions, a section listing the names and dates for student presentations, and another containing the course outline (including presentation guidelines, the reading list, weekly screenings, regulations regarding attendance and the course learning outcomes and objectives). The course outline was

also circulated to the students in paper form. The lecture notes (which are identical to paper handouts circulated at the beginning of each lecture) were posted on the site a week in advance of each lecture.

For World Cinema, an asynchronous online discussion forum on PHPBB was set up, which contained the course outline (also circulated in paper form), essay questions and presentations schedule as above, and several entries each containing information about a world cinema film event in London. The content of the forum would be revised throughout the duration of the course, with new entries added by myself for each new film event, relevant publication, cinema development or topic for discussion. In addition, the students added their own entries which mirrored my own. The course requires the students to collectively watch two films of their choice at two London film festivals, one in Autumn and one in Spring. The forum was used to conduct two online seminars to discuss those films, which replaced two face-to-face seminars. The online seminars were led by myself and required all the students to make a contribution about the films watched as well as to respond to other students' messages. I added my own comments on the arguments when needed, but allowed the students to steer the discussion. Attendance on the forum was taken through counting each entry by the students every week, so that the posting of at least one message when asked to participate constituted a "presence".

Assessment methods

The assessment for World Cinema is through two 5000-word essays (90% of final grade) and an oral presentation (10%). Television and Identity is assessed through a 5000-word essay. In addition, every student is required to give one un-assessed oral presentation.

Benefits

Benefit to diversity

Using online learning has been useful for students with special needs. Having access to lecture material in advance can help in note taking (one student with Asperger Syndrome was having difficulty taking lecture notes in order in the first year and requested handouts in advance); also students can manipulate lecture note electronic documents (such as by enlarging text or changing the background colour) to fit their needs. Therefore, "unlike paper-based resources, e-learning content can be reformatted to meet the needs of individual students" (Littlejohn and Higgison 2003). Having a discussion forum was useful for students who may take longer to formulate their thoughts into a discussion (like international students whose spoken English is not very good), and who could ask questions online after the seminar or add their own reflection on the class activity at their own pace. The posting of lecture notes in advance online also helped international students who I had observed using (often distracting) electronic dictionaries during first-year lectures whenever they encountered a new, difficult word: having the notes in advance meant they could look up such words in advance of the lecture, which can help their concentration during the lecture itself.

In the book *E-tivities*, Gilly Salmon (2003) cites an example of one non-native speaker of English whose observation of spelling or grammar mistakes made by native speakers in a discussion forum made her more confident to participate and post messages herself. This is interesting as normally students rarely have access to written work by their peers. Day and Batson (1996) build on this idea by highlighting the potential of online learning technology to encourage group writing. This allows students to collaborate "at least in the idea-gathering and organizing stages of writing", which they argue is more in tune with how "writing is often done in the real world" (Day and Batson 1996, p.27). They say that online learning enables students to write together, which would be difficult to achieve in a paper-based classroom setting. The outcome of group writing is

that ideas may be generated where they would not have been had the writing been individual, because seeing what others have presented and commenting on it means that students become more active; the technology also gives the students scope for developing their ideas. The discussion forum was a way of improving student writing outside of the classroom, as a number of students were not used to the idea of writing and reflection in their own time (apart from essays), so students were asked to write short critiques of films they had seen. The forum allowed the students to edit their messages after posting them, and they reported their satisfaction with this facility as it allowed them to correct spelling and other mistakes and also to amend their entries according to the flow of the discussion. The forum was also used before face-to-face seminars as a space for collective thinking where students posted their thoughts on the weekly required readings. It thus served as a space where they could have access to pieces of writing by their peers. Evidence of the benefit of this can be found in the next section on assessment.

Benefit to assessment

The only use of summative assessment in this project was through the posting of essay questions on the discussion forum (and Learnwise site in the case of Television and Identity). But the presence of the course outline, essay questions and lecture handouts on the Learnwise site meant that the students had continuous access to this material, which proved valuable during the assessment period. Formative feedback by me was given to students who posted arguments on the discussion forum, either prompting them to give further details or commenting on their points to enhance self-development. However, students themselves found innovative ways of using discussion forum entries in assessments, in that students giving class presentations used the arguments posted by classmates as resources, which is in line with Inglis, Ling and Joosten's (2002) findings. Moreover, the content of each forum message was sometimes used as a revision reference, and students sometimes posted in-class presentations online afterwards. The discussion forum was also used by students to give formative feedback to each other by commenting on their classmates' messages.

Benefit to student activity

Interactivity was a key element in my use of online learning. Littlejohn and Higgison (2003) cite research by Mayes conducted in 1995, where he examined the degree of interactivity of a number of course websites. He found that although the number of courses at the time offering the possibility of interaction (like online discussions) were few, "it is only at this... level of interactivity that learning occurs" (Littlejohn and Higgison 2003). Using an online discussion forum encouraged students to take initiative in expressing themselves and sharing information with others. Having online seminars was a good way of minimizing teacher dominance in the classroom and letting students express their thoughts independently. Following out-of-class screenings most World Cinema students posted their feedback on the experience on the forum through the two online seminars which formed part of the course. They also used the forum to post their own updates on latest cinema developments, reflections on each others' ideas, comments on other films they had seen at the cinema and to inform others of interesting films they recommend, in addition to having online discussions related to the course itself.

PHPBB software enabled online voting. "A voting system may encourage more people to enter into a debate than would normally if more complex or time consuming responses are required" (Stratfold 2000, p. 133). Voting was used to get student opinions on course issues, such as being asked to rate the two class outings to film festivals. Students were required to vote for which films they wanted to see at the festivals, and the online forum was one way in which some students cast their vote. Having all the information about different festivals in one place made it easier for the students to choose what they wanted to see.

I encouraged second-year students to visit the World Cinema forum to learn about what to expect from the course if they decide to take it as an option next year. The forum therefore indirectly increased publicity for my option course and aided informed student choice.

Benefit to course design

Learnwise presented less opportunity for interactive learning, however it worked well to give the students access to lecture notes prior to the lectures. The posting of lecture notes on the Learnwise site prior to lectures did not result in lower attendance levels, which remained on par with attendance levels on other courses at the Department that did not circulate lecture notes in advance. This can be attributed to the lectures not being simply a “reading out” of notes, but rather an opportunity for the students to interact with the lecturer, complete small in-class exercises, watch clips of television programs illustrating some of the notes’ points and participate in group brainstorming when required. The site freed up staff time as it minimized student requests for extra handouts and essay question sheets, and queries about when their oral presentations are due. Using a discussion forum is particularly useful when the teacher needs to constantly update information. The discussion forum was used to keep the World Cinema students updated on the latest developments in cinema through the posting of information on new readings and upcoming film festivals. At the end of the first term, student feedback on World Cinema indicated that the students would like a list of recommended films to be added to their course outline. However instead of giving the students hard copies of film titles, I posted a message listing recommended films on the discussion forum, which meant that I could update the list instantly, and that the students could add their own film titles to the list by responding to my message. The forum was therefore a good space for me to respond to student feedback. It also allowed me to instantly post information about additional useful resources when I came across them (for example, film lectures, workshops, new books, websites). The forum was used by the students to book individual tutorials with me to discuss their essay plans, which eliminated the need for the traditional paper sign up list posted on my office door (which was once stolen, causing chaos with the loss of information on who I was due to meet when). The forum was also used to get student feedback on the course itself through anonymous polls.

Support

The use and setting up of the software required the support of an online learning technology expert who set up the course sites and taught me how to use the technology as well as created PDF documents on how to use the sites that were circulated to the students in advance by e-mail. The training required from the users was minimal as both software packages were very easy to use. Neither myself nor the students reported any problems. Both sites were moderated by myself, so at the end of the academic year the Learnwise site could be re-used the following year without needing extra support. The PHPBB site however needed the support of the online technology expert who I asked to archive the old site and create a new one for the new academic year, which could be done in a matter of minutes. Being the moderator means that only I have access to both the old and new PHPBB sites and will be able to transfer information between the two by copying and pasting relevant messages. The lesson from this is that while setting up the sites and designing courses with an online element can be time consuming, the re-usability of the sites means that they can help save time each subsequent year.

Evaluation

The case study was subject to summative and formative evaluation by the students both in the middle and at the end of the courses. This took place through informal discussion and through the filling of formal feedback forms. The World Cinema students were asked to rate the presence of online learning technology as part of their course, and the 13 students (out of a total of 15) who provided the written feedback gave the following assessment of its presence: satisfactory: 2 students, good: 5 students, excellent: 6 students. Regular attendance was taken on Television

and Identity, and the circulation of lecture outlines online a week in advance of each lecture did not result in a decrease in attendance levels, which remained on par with the norm in the Department (70%). The grades achieved by the students on both courses were also on par with the norm in the Department, with the majority achieving 2:1 grades. On World Cinema, 20% of the students (3 students out of 15) achieved firsts, 47% (7 students) achieved 2:1s, 20% (3 students) achieved 2:2s, 7% (1 student) got a third, and 7% (1 student) failed. On Television and Identity, 8% of the students (4 students out of 50) achieved firsts, 46% (23 students) achieved 2:1s, 38% (19 students) achieved 2:2s, 6% (3 students) got thirds, and 2% (1 student) failed. The case study does not suggest that using blended methods increases the overall grades achieved by the students, but that it contributes to enhancing the learning experience as reported in the student feedback.

The case study was also evaluated by the Royal Holloway's Educational Development Centre (EDC) to which a report on the case study was submitted for peer review by the EDC's Teaching Committee, and the Department of Media Arts' own Teaching Committee. The EDC's teaching committee has commended the case study in writing as an example of good practice (in a letter to myself and on the EDC's website).

Replication: Barriers and enablers

For this case study to be replicated in other contexts, there are a number of challenges that have to be taken into consideration. Setting up online learning sites requires a lot of planning and can therefore be time consuming. It also requires staff training. In my case, such barriers were minimal, however Ryan et al (2000) point out that it can be difficult to convince teachers to use new methods that they have no prior personal experience with. Additionally, some teachers may be reluctant to devote time to acquiring new technological skills. It also requires student training which has to be provided prior to the use of online learning. Thus it demands more technical support from the university.

In order for online learning to succeed, consideration has to be given to the following. First, staff time that will be devoted to the creation, administration and evaluation of resources. Second, the rationale behind the use of online learning in specific courses, as not all courses will automatically benefit from it. Third, the explicit stating of objectives and learning outcomes of courses where online learning is to be implemented (Inglis, Ling and Joosten 2002) (in my case, the need for the ability to immediately update information and make it accessible to the students so they can interact with it and with each other was one objective that necessitated the use of online learning). Fourth, student preparation (both technological and educational) for the use of online learning. Fifth, the different kinds of assessment (both formative and summative) that are suitable for this kind of learning. And finally, ensuring that necessary resources (technical, administrative and pedagogical) are available to support online learning (Ryan et al, 2000).

In addition, the access to and user-friendliness of the online system are important factors that have to be considered for online learning to work (Rius-Riu 2002). Often, there are not enough computers in public access areas. And not all students have internet access at home or even computers. This was an issue reported by my students. Universities should try their best to ensure that a reasonable student:computer ratio is reached, and should endeavour to provide internet access in university-owned student accommodation. Forsyth (1999) also proposes that material offered online (like reading lists and articles) should also be made available in paper form if possible (something I implemented myself in both courses). Access is not only about the ability to log on to the system, but also about knowing how to participate. Universities should therefore provide training to students prior to implementing online learning and perhaps introduce technical manuals.

Another important factor is motivation. Salmon (2003) warns against assuming that the mere presence of the technology will motivate students to use it. Two ways of motivating students that

I used are “achievement motivation”, where students are presented with tasks they can reasonably accomplish (like writing film critiques), and “social motivation”, where students are motivated because they want to “please” others who are important to them (such as classmates or the teacher). This last kind of motivation builds on the presence of an online community, where a sense of belonging to this culture is fostered among the students (Salmon 2003). Mayes (2002) stresses the importance of establishing a community of learners. He says that online learning is not about mere participation, but collaboration. Therefore, working in a group gives meaning to the activity targeted and also the “process of social identification that drives the learners’ activity” (Mayes 2002, p. 23). The World Cinema students reported group belonging as a motivational factor that encouraged them to engage in online discussions. The discussion forum was even used to organize out-of-class social activities, which in turns fostered the sense of community.

In general, it is best for universities to start using online learning on a small scale and give themselves enough time to build the necessary skills and resources, rather than expect an overnight online learning revolution to happen (Mallinen 2002; Littlejohn and Higginson 2003).

Conclusions

Using online learning alongside face-to-face learning is one way in which online technology can be an effective way of enhancing learning. My students reported a higher satisfaction with the learning process as a result of the use of online learning technology. For example, they found the availability of course resources in one place that is accessible both on and off campus 24 hours a day reassuring. The integration of online learning therefore carries several benefits, as outlined above. However, teachers have to be careful not to regard online resources as a simple “sustaining technology” (Weller 2002, p. 54); a better way of looking at online technology is as a facilitator of student-student and teacher-student (and vice versa) communication. Therefore, using online resources means that teachers have to address their teaching methodologies to be compatible with this (new) medium. It is important to ensure that the technology is in line with the courses in which it is used. For example, resource-based learning, where students have to consult a number of sources independently, would be a suitable method that can utilize online learning effectively. Problem-based learning, where students have to discuss the problem presented, find relevant information that would help solve the problem and then post their solutions to others can be achieved effectively through a mixture of small study group meetings and using an online discussion forum. Collaborative learning, where students work in groups, is another method where online learning can prove valuable. In particular, online learning is suitable for this kind of learning (alongside traditional methods) because of the following factors: First, because online discussion forums offer a chance for students to explain their work in writing, which takes a longer time than a spontaneous oral response, and because they allow the students to re-visit their comments at a later time, this kind of online learning encourages student reflection. Second, working in a group where tasks are divided between members, where findings have to be posted online periodically, encourages active learning. Third, having to do the above provides an opportunity to enhance students’ communication skills. Finally, students’ comments on each others’ work and/or the teacher’s formative feedback aid students’ deep learning of topics, especially where students are encouraged to seek such feedback and engage in it themselves (Weller 2002). This is because deep learning is more likely to be achieved through active learning requiring critical thinking and cognitive engagement than in passive learning. The need for critical thinking as one of the major outcomes of education is an important issue facing universities today (Oliver 2002).

But perhaps one of the most important factors in the success of online learning—or any other learning method for that matter—is the sharing of good practice among staff. I have been sharing my findings about the use of online learning with colleagues at the Department and am offering consultations to those wishing to use the technology in their courses, which has resulted in an increase in the use of the technology across the Department. A degree of reluctance to try new

methods or a fear of new technology is to be expected in higher education institutions. Therefore, universities have to actively engage in promoting the use of online learning. One way in which this can be done is through publicizing insightful case studies by staff among their peers. This can start at the departmental level, through informal discussions, e-mail and in staff meetings, and can then progress to broader university-wide activities and beyond.

Online learning is not for everyone. However, when used in appropriate conditions, it has the potential to enhance the quality of learning and to move teaching from being about “transmission” (Inglis, Ling and Joosten 2002) (of information), or a one-way stream of knowledge, into a collaborative, active, student-centered approach. Therefore, the shift into using online learning should not be viewed as one from traditional to virtual, but one from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach (Hase and Ellis 2002).

Bibliography

Day, Michael and Batson, Trent (1996). The network-based writing classroom: the ENFI idea. In Collins, Marie and Berge, Zane L. (Eds.), *Computer mediated communication and the online classroom: Volume II: Higher Education*, pp. 25-46. New Jersey: The Hampton Press.

Forsyth, Ian (1999). *Teaching and learning materials and the internet*. London: Kogan Page.

Hase, Stuart and Ellis, Alan (2002). Problems with online learning are systemic, not technical. In Stephenson, John (ed.), *Teaching and learning online: Pedagogies for new technologies*, pp. 27-36. London: Kogan Page.

Inglis, Alistair, Ling, Peter and Vera Joosten (2002). *Delivering digitally: Managing the transition to the knowledge media*. London: Kogan Page.

Littlejohn, Allison and Higgison, Carol (2003). *A guide for teachers – E-learning series No. 3*. LTSN Generic Centre [Online]. Available: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?section=generic&process=filter_fields&type=all&id=4&history.

Mallinen, Sisko (2002). Teacher effectiveness and online learning. In Stephenson, John (ed.), *Teaching and learning online: Pedagogies for new technologies*, pp. 139-149. London: Kogan Page.

Mayes, Terry (2002). Learning technology and learning relationships. In Stephenson, John (ed.), *Teaching and learning online: Pedagogies for new technologies*, pp. 16-26. London: Kogan Page.

Oliver, Ron (2002). Exploring the development of critical thinking skills through a Web-supported problem-based learning environment. In Stephenson, John (ed.), *Teaching and learning online: Pedagogies for new technologies*, pp. 98-111. London: Kogan Page.

Rius-Riu, Mercè (2002). Using the WWW in learning and teaching. LTSN Generic Centre [Online]. Available: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?section=generic&process=filter_fields&type=all&id=4&history

Ryan, Steven et al (2000). *The Virtual University: The internet and resource-based learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Salmon, Gilly (2003). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Stratfold, Matthew (2000). Promoting learner dialogues on the Web. In Eisenstadt, Mark and Vincent, Tom (Eds.), *The Knowledge Web: Learning and collaborating on the Net*, pp. 119-134. London: Kogan Page.

Weller, Martin (2002). *Delivering learning on the Net: The why, what and how of online education*. London: Kogan Page.

Key words

Online learning, media studies, student-centered approach, hybrid method, e-learning, international students, blended learning, English second language