Guest Paper

Haven't a Clue: Guiding Undergraduates through a Literature Review

Abstract

This report describes development of the content section of an undergraduate major project VLE site developed to guide students through the process of a literature review. This interactive site was developed in the form of a Cluedo board to engage students in a novel and interesting way of working through materials while trying to discover the missing person, weapon and room. In the construction of the Haven’t a Clue site, the tutor team brought together a range of existing materials which previously had been difficult to find and not presented within an organisational structure.

The key consideration in this task was to decide, ‘What activity do we want to generate in the student?’ and ‘How do we motivate students to plan and implement their progress?’ To this end, the VLE site also contains a communication mechanism to allow the tutor team to send motivational tips to larger student groups at key stages of their project.

Following the introduction of this VLE site, both student achievement and satisfaction have measurably increased.

Keywords

VLE, Literature Review, Undergraduate Major Project

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Introduction and Background
I am the module leader for the Undergraduate Major Project (UGMP) module for the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (FHSCE), which is comprised of around 250 staff and 1300 students. The UGMP in FHSCE is a 10,000 word literature review. This is the last module that students undertake before they complete the National Student Survey (NSS). When I took it over, the student evaluations indicated that they were generally dissatisfied with the teaching and learning, and that they felt there was not enough teaching time. In addition, there was both a high fail rate and poor pass marks which affected degree classification. I felt this could be affecting our University NSS scores.

These were some of the major issues I faced when I was asked to develop this into streamlined, quality controlled module, which would enhance student learning and produce student and staff satisfaction (Wankel and Blessinger, 2013). This module had been designed to be autonomous with minimal teaching time and supervision. The students complained of lack of support due to this autonomous learning, and I felt these issues needed to be addressed. I felt that the students needed ‘a stimulating learning environment’ (Anglia Ruskin, 2011, p.3). Consequently I decided to develop an online activity centre (Bach, Haynes and Smith, 2007), in the form of an interactive VLE site, to support students through the module.

Development
I arranged a meeting with the Director of Learning and Teaching, the Learning Technologist, and a teaching colleague to discuss the development of an interactive VLE site. The aim was to address the unmet needs of the students by moving from factual or literal learning to interpretive, analytic and inferential learning (Gau, 2012). The goal was to develop the content section of the existing VLE site to enable the students to complete their UGMP more effectively. The idea of a game was put forward as a teaching aid (Shanahan et al., 2006) and it was felt that a Cluedo board would be effective because each room could focus on the different elements of developing a literature review, while at the same time allowing students to have fun (Shanahan et al., 2006). This led to the development of the Haven’t a Clue VLE site.

I then led and managed the project. The Learning Technologist and I met on a regular basis to facilitate its development because I had the subject knowledge and he the technical knowledge. The aim was to develop a novel mode of learning, incorporating an engaging innovative environment. Thus the focus was to transform the UGMP into a student-centred learning environment (Gau, 2012) which has an evidence base, utilising materials which are ‘cognitively rich’ (Gau, 2012, p.8).

Furthermore, we believed that this teaching and learning development needed to incorporate all learning styles (Kolb, 1984) to ensure it was inclusive and met all students’ learning needs. As we are aware that not everyone will have played Cluedo, the concept and the game is explained during the classroom teaching (Shanahan et al., 2006), and the students are shown how to use the VLE site. Our goal was to develop a centre of excellence which involved the use of effective communication.

Extensive teaching and learning material was already available (Hinchcliff, 2009) for the UGMP. Some of this information was already available in the document section of the existing VLE site, including a podcast which I had produced, plus teaching materials in the form of exercises, power points and quizzes. The Learning Technologist and I then began a search for more materials at our University, which included an invitation to the librarians for their contribution. Materials and learning aids were found in a variety of locations including Student Services. Once the Learning Technologist had designed the board, which allowed students to play the actual game if they wished, he and I met to decide how the contents for each section of the board should be developed.

Biggs (2003) states that, ‘being active while learning is better than being inactive’ (2003, p 79). Dewey (1916) first introduced the concept of game playing as a methodology. Shanahan et al. (2006) study highlighted the effectiveness of game playing as a teaching aid, but cautioned that the game should not become more important than the learning, and the aim of the game should be to motivate the students. We kept these issues in mind, as each room on the board began its transformation into an area of engagement for the students to develop and master the skill of writing a literature review (Biggs, 2003).
The Haven’t a Clue board is comprised of eight ‘rooms’ (see Figure 1), each of which contains information about an element of constructing a literature review:

- **Reception** – Introduction to Literature Review
- **The Study** – Planning your Progress
- **The Library** – Selecting the Literature / Evaluating your sources of information / Referencing
- **The Lounge** – Note Taking Critical Thinking and Writing up
- **The Billiard Room** – (Formative) Peer- and Self-Assessment (Learning Outcomes Explained)
- **The Gallery** – Examples of previous students’ work
- **The Conservatory** – Good academic practice / Preparing and Handing in Your Work (Turnitin)
- **The Kitchen** – Site map

The first room to be developed was the Reception, in which we provided information about what a literature review actually is, and how the team expected it to be developed, because I was aware that there are different types of literature reviews (Aveyard, 2014). The information was provided in different formats, including text, and audio and video files to address the diversity of student preferences. The learning outcomes for the module are easily accessible and explained in The Billiard Room, as these can be overlooked (Hinchcliff, 2009).

Once the task and the learning outcomes had been explained, the next challenge was to help the students to plan. Feedback from both students and supervisors has indicated that time management poses a significant challenge for students. Students have from six to eight months to complete this module (depending on their course) and consequently students frequently put this module to one side as they think they have sufficient time to complete it. However, the amount of time available is actually used as a defence (Freud, 1976) against preparing, planning, sorting and writing. The Study, therefore, includes, among other learning aids, a month-by-month planner which many students have found extremely valuable. The Learning Technologist also developed an email system, linked to the planner, which sends regular, time-sensitive emails to all students to motivate and encourage them to start, develop, write and
polish their literature review, depending on their progress. Students can also review their progress via a planning survey.

These examples are just a brief overview of the depth of this development. Please visit the VLE site to explore further: https://vle.anglia.ac.uk/modules/2013/fhsceugmp/UGMP01/Content/Start.aspx

Evaluation

Staff feedback on the site has been overwhelmingly positive from the outset. One member of staff said that student feedback was that the site was ‘fantastic’, and that they had nominated it for an award. My department head reported how other members of staff had praised the site, and complemented the Haven’t a Clue board, especially its pedagogic underpinning.

Student feedback has been similarly positive. The students tell me it is excellent and that it helps to motivate them and encourages them to learn. One student, for example, sent an email declaring:

I have discovered Cluedo! I remember seeing this before but I thought it was a pop-up and didn't realise it was a part of the course. It is a really good idea packed with a lot of information. I like how you have related it to everyday objects / tasks such as making beans on toast.

Another student excitedly commented,

Julie!! I have done my first ever proper contents page, how cool is that?

However, it is The Gallery of previous students’ work and the examples of Ideas, Connections and Extensions (ICE) that the students tell me they value most. There was some discussions about UGMP examples and getting permission to put whole literature reviews in The Gallery. Kean (2012) suggests this can be an effective way of helping the students to understand the task, process and content expectations, however, each student is unique (Hinchcliff, 2009) and learning styles differ (Fleming and Mills, 1992). I was concerned that if a single literature review was placed in The Gallery it might overwhelm some students due to the style, and this could de-motivate some students and cause anxiety. Therefore, with each student’s permission, I uploaded sections from various parts of the reviews, an introduction, for example, or a search strategy, a historical component, a theme, a conclusion, and so forth. I then either criticised or analysed the sections from a supervisor perspective and included my comments, as although these exemplars achieved high marks, none of them were perfect. Therefore the comments are meant to guide the students to aim higher (Anglia Ruskin, 2011). What I did next was to ICE one of the themes by highlighting in colour the ideas, connections and extensions, because many students could not understand how to build and develop the review. The student’s feedback about The Gallery has been highly positive with students commenting on how this has clarified the process for them. Staff have also complimented this section as ‘an excellent learning strategy’.

Another important aspect of the site is that all information the students could need is in one place. In my experience, based on the emails and phone calls I get before hand-in, it is the ‘little issues’ (e.g. assignment format, negotiating the hand-in process, and so forth) that generate the most anxiety (Killgallon, 2012) for students before hand-in, not the actual content, and the materials in Haven’t a Clue address all these little issues.

The development is ongoing which includes the regular emails to students. I have permission to put more exemplars in The Gallery and I am currently writing the supervisors’ notes. The Learning Technologist and I are also developing a questionnaire to send via SurveyMonkey, to evaluate the board more formally (Aveyard, 2014). Workshops will be facilitated for staff who are unfamiliar with the content section, to help them understand the process and, like me, to use it in supervisions with their students to explain formative feedback in a more visual manner.

The Haven’t a Clue board received a commendation at a validation event this year, which included externals. The results of the evaluations will aid further developments and we intend to produced and publish a full paper in due course. The VLE site was presented at the Anglia Ruskin Learning and Teaching Conference 2014, and we hope to present externally later this year.
Impact on Student Performance

Student achievement has improved and the marks for the UGMP average 58.5% (one cohort of students) this year, compared with 53% on previous year. In the last delivery 50% of one cohort produced marks of 60% and above, with 24.9% of these being above 70%. This has, in turn, resulted in increased degree classifications (Anglia Ruskin, 2012), with, for example, one cohort of students this year achieving seven Firsts and eight Upper Seconds. In addition, module evaluations now average 70-100% for overall satisfaction, whereas previously they were much lower.

Future Development

I am currently developing a new Masters curriculum and the Learning Technologist and I are already working on the VLE design which will be based on great international train journeys of the world (e.g. The Trans-Siberian Express). The site will support a blended learning module and the students will gather their learning material and support as they journey around the world.

References


