Chapter 13:
iBEL: Students' Perceptions of Learning Design

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This paper examines iBEL, the International Baccalaureate e-Learning Laboratory, focusing in particular on the role of the student voice in evaluating and developing the use of Open Source Technologies in the post-16 curriculum.

Introduction

The iBEL project was a BECTA funded research project that took place between May 2007 and April 2008, and that aimed to explore the following question:

> *What role can learning design systems play in fostering independent learning in students on the International Baccalaureate programme?*

In exploring this question, the project aimed to:

- Encourage learner independence;
- Support independent learning;
- Build upon existing work in the eLISA[1] and eLIDA CAMEL[2] projects that explored learning design activity using selected open source platforms;
- Track learner activities to uncover common patterns of behaviour that may inform the design of future learning to discover principles of effective learning designs;
- Support a range of learning styles;
- Seek learner feedback on the learning designs and tools used.

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1   e-Learning Independent Study Award (eLISA) is a JISC funded Distributed e-Learning (DeL) project: http://www.gre.ac.uk/elisa

2   eLIDA CAMEL is a JISC funded Design for Learning (D4L) project: http://www.gre.ac.uk/elidacamel

Before iBEL

Prior to this project, the Department of Education, Leadership and Development at the University of Greenwich (ELD) had been involved in other projects that provided the basis for the iBEL project. The first of these, the eLISA Project, had looked at the influence of learning design and e-learning in supporting students' study skills in schools and colleges in the London Borough of Greenwich, through the use of the open source systems, content management systems, Moodle and LAMS[1]. Dartford Grammar School (DGS) was involved as part of the dissemination of information at the end of eLISA and as a result was invited to take part in the eLIDA CAMEL Project. The aim of this project was to look at the flexibility of LAMS and Moodle, and to look at re-usability and the mentoring of staff. It sought to share practice between institutions. DGS staff were involved in this and iBEL grew out of the work done there.

iBEL – the international e-learning laboratory

This new collaboration involved just the University of Greenwich and Dartford Grammar School. The nominated teachers at Dartford Grammar School worked with practitioners from the Greenwich Department of Education, Leadership and Development (ELD) to develop their understanding of learning design[2]. Dartford Grammar School is one of a growing number of state schools to offer the International Baccalaureate Dilpoma[3]. The focus of practitioners' work was, therefore, situated in the 16-19 learner area of the school, where e-learning had been a serious focus as a way of developing students' independent learning, personalising learning, and thus raising standards of provision.

The focus of this project was on content and activity creation and evaluation in a Moodle environment. It sought to understand the creative combinations of the pedagogical techniques needed to deliver effective design for learning activities in and outside the classroom. The evaluation of the learning activities by learners formed a very important part of the methodology for the project.

Role of the learner

In total 70 students were involved in the project at some point. The information below was accessed in two ways: through an online survey and through filmed interviews.

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1   LAMS is one of the first open source Learning Design systems to achieve widespread use, and indeed was singled out by the DFES for a trial by the Specialist Schools Trust to test its potential to develop and enhance learning at the Secondary level (http://www.cripsat.org.uk/current/elearn/bectalam.htm)

2   The ELD is a national leader in practitioner-focused Learning Design, and has successfully led national e-learning projects in relation to study skills Learning Design. For this project it hosted the integrated LAMS/Moodle environment, offered accredited training in using the system (http://www.gre.ac.uk/celtt/workshops) and provided guidance in learning design methodology.

3   http://www.ibo.org/diploma

We started the project with a belief that today's students, born 1982 – 1991 (the 'Net Generation'), regard technology as just a part of their world (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Initial surveys suggested that this was the case.

At the start of the project all learners felt able to describe themselves as confident users of technology, using a wide range of different technologies on a daily basis. 94% said that they liked, or didn't mind, using computers in their studies, and 74% said that they would not mind having the opportunity to use the types of activities to be used in the project, such as the forum, chatroom and journal, which they recognised from other applications. Their only concern about using technology was a fear of technology 'going wrong'.

Conclusions drawn from learner feedback

Independent learning appeared to be enhanced when:

- Teachers provided a clear framework for learning by selecting and linking to materials and resources, and structuring activities. Students reported that this saved them time in searching for resources whose reliability was unknown, and commented that the need for the teacher in face-to-face sessions could be diminished so long as the materials and activities had been pre-selected and structured.

- Used as an integral part of their general programme of study, rather than for extra or one-off activities. The blending of the use of a D4L system in class and outside class time improved student engagement with the online activities and materials.

- The representation of a learning design articulates when and how learning will occur over an extended time period. This also helps teachers to plan in the long term. Structured design helps students to prepare for a variety of activities and assists their understanding of the material they need to cover to achieve the learning outcomes. Teachers who pre-organised materials, supported communication and offered reassurance were leading to an increase in confidence in subject learning.

- Students enjoy the activities. Specific technologies appeared to motivate students in particular subject disciplines, notably forum, glossary tools and chat for students of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and English. Learners liked the links selected by their teachers to sites containing rich audio and video media.

Students' evaluation in more detail

At the Greenwich Conference, Eva Okunbor and Sean Myers, two Year 12 students, were able to give a summary of the students' views. Their comments revealed that they quickly adapted to the layout of the course areas, which they could easily access at home or at school. They did, however, feel that the design and navigation of Moodle was not entirely intuitive and was 'old-fashioned.'

Students were positive about the fact that the course areas allowed them to collaborate with others during periods of independent study. Five interviewees said that they had enjoyed the chat sessions, one stating that it was using the sort of tools that they would normally use at home. In the survey, one student was very positive about the forum 'because it's similar to other chat room sites such as Hotmail'. Three of the students interviewed commented on the importance of being able to share ideas, which was also a major focus of responses to the survey question: What did you like best? One student stated:

> *I liked to get different interpretations from other students, which helped to improve my understanding*

while another commented:

> *I liked reading other people's responses as they allowed me to consider and understand a range of opinions and approaches ... broadening my own understanding of the topic.*

A different student's response was:

> *I was ... able to view others' opinions. In this way, I was able to reflect upon what I [had] learnt, and look at different aspects.*

MFL students commented particularly on the collaborative glossary tool and the chat rooms. Eva Okunbor noted:

> *The glossary helps us to learn a lot of relevant vocabulary and each entry is reasonably quick to complete. It is also good for revision. Also, the chatrooms are a fun way to practise writing / conversing in French. The forums are a useful way to post homework / share resources.*

In English, most students liked the opportunity to work at their own pace. The forums and QuickTopic[1] tasks allowed them to see other students' comments. This gave them new ideas and enabled even reticent students to respond. Several returned to the course area to view these ideas as they revised coursework essays later in the course.

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1   http://www.quicktopic.com

Where teachers had added links to resources, students appreciated the ability to access these with ease. Several pointed out the fact that this saved them time, as they didn't get caught up in endless trawls of the internet, and it allowed them to feel more confident in their independent study:

> *The availability of resources meant that I spent less time searching the internet or books for help/ resources which allowed me more time to study*

> *The fact that it is accessible at any time ... is very helpful as it means that I don't have to be in school to access certain bits of information. I can easily work at my own pace at home.*

Students also felt that it was useful to have materials available to review and use if they needed to catch up on work for any reason. Some students commented on the benefits for independent study:

> *I am able to work more individually and try to work things out by myself. It is a new and interesting way to learn.*

Asked whether they felt that they needed the teacher less, 8 of the 16 students interviewed felt that they needed the teacher less, and this was also the feeling of 50% of the students taking part in the online survey. They qualified this in several ways. One student pointed out that the teacher was important because the teacher developed the site and 'asked the questions'. Two students felt that they needed the teacher less, but that they knew that they could contact the teacher easily by MSN or email if they needed help. This gave them the confidence to work independently, but also has interesting implications for the way that we see the role of the teacher in future and for work-force remodelling. Several students pointed out that online feedback from the teacher was important.

A concern of teachers was that a certain number of students in a teaching group would not access the site in study lessons or at home, and to some extent this was the case. In most cases, however, the majority of students did access the courses as required. Moodle reports and questionnaire responses suggest that students are, possibly, more likely to use the course areas if they have been used as an integral part of their general programme of study, which is demonstrated by records showing access to the site.

For example, in one group of 19 students who used a course on The Poetry of Wilfred Owen during lessons, 14 accessed the site independently during this programme of study, and most of these students used it during the weeks leading up to their oral examination, reviewing the materials and looking at the extra revision points available. Similarly, the French site, which has been used as an integral part of the study programme, has been

used regularly for independent study. Where teachers used Moodle for extra activities and one-off activities, the results were not so favourable.

This is important for our understanding of the use of technology in education, and supports the view that the focus should be on the learning and not on the technology. Students were inclined to see the value of the courses in terms of consolidation, revision and reflection, which suggests that they advocate a blended approach. One states:

> *I think I need my teacher no more or less than before. I find that I gain my base knowledge and grasp on a topic and its complexities in class, and this method simply rounds off my understanding and helps me reflect on my ideas afterwards.*

While students made many positive comments about the use of Moodle in their learning, they also had some important reservations. 31% said that they enjoyed their learning a bit less using online systems. Only 59% felt that they learnt the same or more using the online units, 41% felt that they didn't learn as much when a unit was taught entirely online. One student commented, 'I feel that I learn the most from debating the meaning of books in class,' and another noted, 'I think that just as much can be learnt from things like group discussions.' Some felt that the 'tasks should have been more interactive'; they had specific irritations with Moodle, such as the student who remarked 'I don't like the fact that you only have 30 minutes to edit your work [in the Forum]'; and, while many were positive about the chat rooms, one said 'I did not like the use of the chat room for group discussions, as there were too many people adding ideas at the same time, making it difficult to understand.'

This was a reservation also held by some of the teachers, and two of the students interviewed were concerned that MSN and chat might be distracting. Students who are very good at the combination of oral discussion and note taking were not as keen on the online discussions, which they found time consuming. One student suggested that perhaps security / confidence is an important consideration for students by commenting:

> *Not all exercises can be managed or marked by a teacher, therefore one does not know whether the answers are correct.*

Important to note are these students' observations:

> *It's nice to have a variety of different ways to learn and Moodle provides one of those, however it's good to have a teacher to answer your questions. It would also be boring to simply self-teach French*

> *It is not the way of learning I would wish to partake in for all my studies, in all subjects, but it allows students to access very useful resources, especially for reading/listening to things online.*

These comments show the importance of variety and a blended approach. At the end of the questionnaire, when asked 'Did the units studied using Moodle or LAMs help you to feel more confident in learning independently?', two thirds said that it had enabled them to feel more confident about independent study, and one third said it made no difference to their confidence. No one said that it made them feel less confident.

When given the opportunity to make general observations about the place of technology in learning, students suggest that they do see technology as a significant tool for developing their learning. One student asserted, 'technology could soon become the new school.' An important comment for this school was, 'Technology is clearly evolving quickly, this is of great advantage to students. ...I believe it is not used enough in school and could be of great advantage to the students as well as the staff.' Another student was 'looking forward to seeing more teacher-made sites (like Moodle) tailored for [his] courses in the future.' The assertion that, 'More subjects should have websites or shared areas that can be accessed from school and home' shows that this student places importance on having access to curriculum materials at home.

In a more developed comment, student Sean Myers alludes to the general impact that technology has had:

> *I think that technology has opened up the boundaries of our learning, giving us the means and encouraging us to share our ideas as a whole, no matter how loud our voice in class may be. We can create a network of resources that we can access either individually or as a group at any time, and [technology] has greatly expanded my ability to research and gather information on any topic and made my approach, opinion and understanding in a multitude of areas far more rounded and informed.*

Myers sees technology as one way amongst several in which to learn:

> *I think that technology in learning these days is very important, because of the evidence that children learn in different ways. By enabling them to use a wide range of learning methods, you are maximising the learning potential, thus creating a better potential education and future for children and this country.*

Final thoughts

Teachers started from the premise that the students represented the Net Generation. This was true in many ways, but from the students' comments, teachers and leaders were able to refine their understanding.

The students' comments have informed not just the planning and lesson design of the individual teachers involved, but also the strategic planning. For while the students were, in many ways, very keen to embrace new technology in their everyday lives, and did see its benefits, they are also the product of an education system which, in spite of student-centred initiatives, still places importance on the teacher, who, for the students, is a source of security. Students are part of an education system that is only just embracing the opportunities provided by technology and, therefore, are in some respects yet to be entirely open to the concept of online learning[1].

For students, as for teachers, there will inevitably be a period of adjustment, during which they become accustomed to learning in different ways and to new ways of communication. Ultimately, at the Greenwich Conference, Sean and Eva were unequivocal advocates for a blended approach, and while they may have been ambivalent in some of their responses to the sessions taught, they were clear about the fact that they expected the use of technologies to form a part of their learning.

References

Oblinger, D., & Oblinger, J.L. (2005). *Teaching the Net Generation*. Educause.

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1   The Sixth Form at Dartford Grammar School takes at least 80 students a year from other schools. Many of the students involved in the project had attended South London mixed ability schools. They had not all been through the Dartford Grammar School system.