Using blended learning to increase student participation

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Abstract   240 Second year students were studying Electronic Marketing. Year two makes no contribution to degree class. Students can be difficult to motivate with tutorial attendance typically poor. Student objectives are typically a pass @ 35%. There were very high failure rates in 2004.
Tutorial preparation was set each week to answer questions based on a short case study from set text book and to submit this preparation via StudyNet. Of these submissions, two were selected for marking. 5% max was given for attendance at tutorials.
Results: Improved attendance at tutorials and much improved pass rates. Some additional work was involved for staff but benefits included more meaningful tutorial discussions and interesting student presentations. Student reaction was mixed.

The Scenario

This is a module taught in the Business School at the University of Hertfordshire, consisting typically of around 240 second year students studying Electronic Marketing.

Second year students can be difficult to motivate with tutorial attendance typically poor. The Business School has no attendance requirement and student objectives can be simply to achieve a pass at 35%. Year two makes no contribution to degree class at the University of Hertfordshire, with the classification being based on final year results. Students must pass their second year modules in order to progress to the final year. Some spend their third year on a work placement; some go straight through to the final year.
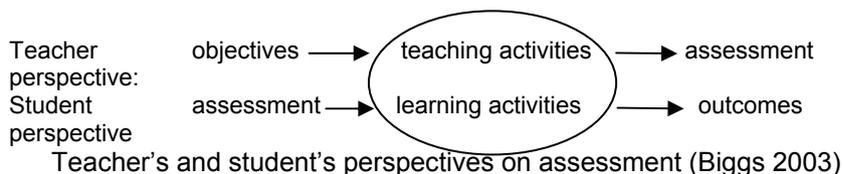
There were very high failure rates this module in 2004 – 47% before re-sits and resubmissions. The module is not always what the students expect: because they are generally familiar with the internet, are iPod friendly and used to computer games and eBay trading, they expect simply to acquire an academic framework to organise what they already know. But the module content includes electronic marketing research, CRM (customer relationship management) systems, ERP (enterprise resource planning) and EDI (electronic data interchange) and these elements are not usually within the students' knowledge sets.

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Addressing Low Engagement

The marketing group had over a number of years operated a system to try to instil better fundamentals in the first two years of study.

- A small percentage of the coursework marks were allocated simply for attending tutorials each week – a total of 5% of the overall marks for the module.

- Each week the students are required to prepare for their tutorials and the preparation forms a major part of the formative coursework marks for the module. Tutorial preparation each week was a) to prepare answers to questions based on a short case study from the set text and b) to evaluate a web site of particular relevance to the topic in hand and to submit this preparation via StudyNet (the university's managed learning environment). Of these submissions, two were selected at random for marking at 15% each.

- The other submissions contribute towards a maximum of 5% for tutorial preparation and submission only; they are not marked.

The rationale behind this assessment regime is in accordance with Biggs' (2003) model illustrating the importance of aligning the assessment with the learning objectives:

Teacher's and student's perspectives on assessment (Biggs 2003)

"Students second-guess the assignment and make that their syllabus . . . In aligned teaching . . the assessment reinforces learning." *(Biggs 2003)*

Main Findings

Improved attendance at tutorials was evident from the outset of the module. Attendance was up from about one third in 2004 – with variations between tutorials and between weeks - to about two thirds. Almost all the students who did attend the tutorials had carried out the preparatory work.

Staff found that tutorials could now be used for useful developments of issues arising in the case studies. Students were also well prepared to discuss their findings of the web sites. Not all staff used the same tutorial structure; some would ask the students to discuss their work in small groups and present the consensus of their findings. Some would lead a class discussion of the issues

and some would develop more advanced questions for the students to work on in the tutorial time.

Pass rates were also much improved:

- Exam
  - Average 43% in 2005, compared with:
  - Average 39% in 2004
- Course work
  - Average 61% in 2005, compared with:
  - Average 46% in 2004
- Overall Failure rate
  - 28% in 2005, compared with
  - 47% in 2004

Impact on Staff

Some additional work was involved in recording submissions, recording attendance and dealing with legitimate absences, for example, illness and interviews for a third year placement.

It was also necessary to carry out some checks that the work submitted which was not actually marked did relate to the topics set. Students have been known to upload a blank piece of paper or some work from another week, and some would start the right week's work but not complete all, or even very much, of it.

However there were benefits for staff too, such as more meaningful tutorial discussions and interesting student presentations.

Student Reaction

Most students had taken a level one marketing module employing a similar assessment regime, and there was little or no comment from these students. The MLE's class discussion facility for the module in 2004/5 did not include any discussion of the regime. Anecdotally, some agreed regular work is useful, especially at exam time. Some resented work required each week! The quotations below are taken from 2005/6 class discussion.

 "It is very hard to juggle the work load, with on going assignments, presentations and revision to do, it is very hard to fit around weekly preperation. I know that it may help, but it doesnt necessarily stick in your mind when there are four modules with all types of different work at once. If we didnt have weekly assignments we could dedicate more time to revision and coursework, possibly achieving a better grade as a result, does anyone agree?" *Louise, Second year Student.*

"Personally i don't mind doing the assignments as part of our eventual assesment even though at times they seem a little too much to be doing on top of our other work we have. My only problem with them is that i feel we do not have enough feedback from what we have done each week when we are in our seminars." *Mark, Second year Student.*

"If we had coursework given to us in the normal way, i.e. group coursework on one topic, we would actually spend less time then completing all the weekly assignments." *Second year Student rep.*

"I think doing the case studies regularly is a better way to learn the module as opposed to trying to learn everything right at the end when it comes to revision. Going through each case study in the tutorials will give us that extra help and tell us where we have gone wrong so we can get it right next time." *Lee A, Second year Student.*

It is interesting to note that although it was repeatedly stressed that the work was tutorial preparation, the students uniformly refer to it as 'assignments'

Relevance for future research and/or practice
This year – we have developed the module so that tutorials build on preparation rather than simply bringing the students' individual work together. Lectures are being recorded as MP3 files. Reaction to this is almost exclusively positive.

"If you didn't understand an explanation in the lecture, you can listen back and maybe pick up on something you missed the first time round." *Tine, Second year Student.*

"This really helps me,....i struggle to take everything in, even though im listening, and often end up teaching myself! i think all subjects should use it" *Second year Student rep.*

One student disagreed:
"I feel its just another reason / excuse for people not to turn up to lectures, if you failed to attend the lecture you miss out on the explination of the slides, but with this sound recording which im sure will eventually result in the recording of the whole lecture what is the inncentive for turning up?" *Lee B, Second year Student.*

We replied:

"Yes, Lee, and this is a major concern of staff too. However, as you clearly realise yourself, there are very good reasons to actually attend. I don't think it's very likely that anyone who was not present would be able to understand fully what was going on just by listening to the recording, any more than you could understand just by looking at the lecture slides. The intention is to help people who are not finding it easy, and want to revisit the lecture. Inevitably some students will miss some lectures and this will help them catch up too." *Jenny Evans, Tutor*

Other students expressed their views:

"I understand what Lee is saying in that people will have no incentive to turn up, but if you've paid your tuition fees then it should be your choice how you study. As long as at the end of the module you have a good understanding of the subject and you pass the test whats the difference if you went to the lecture or not." *Brady, Second year Student*

"yeah, it's very useful for me as well.!!!" *Xie, Second year Student*

"VERY good idea, it is hard to listen and take in everything said in a lecture, and so to be able to hear it again is useful. i'm sure a lot of students would benefit from this." *Christopher, Second year Student*

Reference

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, second edition, SHRE and Open University Press.

Biography

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