A community of learning in multicultural management education; collaboration in virtual space

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The building of a blended community of learning in an international classroom is an example of an emerging learning environment. Multicultural students of management were more used to a traditional teaching methodology, delivered face-to-face, with a lecture style. These students were introduced to the concept of a community of learning, through a learning environment that blended face-to-face with online activities. The blended classroom enabled initial steps to be made in the introduction of social media for learning in the form of blogs and wikis. Research undertaken with these students revealed their appreciation of some benefits of learning technology, and concern about time management. This chapter offers insights from both teacher and international students about the introduction of learning technology in the classroom.

Keywords: Community of Learning; Social Media; Learning Technology; Collaborative learning

Introduction

There is a space in teaching and learning; the space that is the face to face (F2F) classroom, as it awaits the introduction of technology to support the learning process. The introduction of technology in the classroom, in the form of a virtual space, acts as a complement to traditional teaching. Such models of blended learning are aimed to engage students of the Net Generation, i.e. those who have grown up with computer technology.[1]

The rationale for making the move to a blended environment is central to the idea of building a virtual community of learning. ‘blended learning is the most appropriate solution for many teachers working in traditional classrooms who want to make use of digital technologies as an aspect of their practice [2]. I wish to major on three reasons for such a change in pedagogy, which I will introduce here and discuss during the chapter. When educators have the students physically in front of them, both teacher and students are held captive in a physical classroom for set hours per week. As a complement to those set hours of study, a blended space allows teaching and learning to be continued beyond the traditional time. As a second point, the usual teaching layout in the F2F environment has the students sitting one behind the other in the ‘train’ or are on the ‘bench’, tier above tier in the typical lecture theater. Educators and learners cannot usually change the physical layout, but a bigger teaching and learning space can be created. Through the wireless network available in most classrooms, the next-to-next-to style, or the one-on-top-of-the-other closed configuration, opens up into another learning world, a virtual world. A final point in favor of learning technology is the shift from student as passive individual observer to active collaborative learner, a shift that can be facilitated in a technologically supported educational world. The emphasis here is on the effectiveness of a virtual learning community that overcomes the physical constraints of a more traditional classroom environment. This chapter is a timely reminder that the contribution of technology in education enables a community of learning to be built that expands the classroom beyond the physical environment.

The Learners

The University is based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country consisting of seven Emirates (states) on the Arabian Gulf in the Middle East. The independent university, founded less than 15 years ago, follows an American curriculum with all studies conducted in English. The University student population is multicultural with 82 different nationalities; the majority is from an Arab country. It is a co-educational (53/47% male/female) institution, and the majority of the students are aged between 18-21 yrs old. The School of Business and Management is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The students involved were enrolled in a mandated course, Organizational Behavior (OB), or a program elective, Leadership (L), as part of an undergraduate business degree (Table 1).

Many authors have written about the next generation of digital learners[3,4], and it is agreed that the “Net Generation” has expectations of information technology because of their lifetime experiences with computers[5]. The Economist[6] also recognizes that for a generation who has grown up with the internet, it may have ‘transformed their approach to education’, but the same article does question whether ‘it really makes sense to generalise about a whole generation in
this way’? The experience of internet usage for a generation of learners across the globe might not be equal or the same experience, for example the challenges and perspectives of introducing blended learning to students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been discussed [7]. The use of learning technologies is therefore an important consideration in the teaching of international students in the UAE.

Learning Technology

The issue of the increased use of learning technology with a population of international students is important for a number of reasons. One issue is how far is there acceptance of the use of learning technology from the students themselves. Student comments from the survey results during this experiment can help us to interpret the acceptability of technology by the learners involved. Another issue is the acceptability and use of learning technologies in international teaching. The introduction of learning technologies to undergraduate students has been debated over time in the Western hemisphere, to such an extent that Owens and Price ask,

1HE [Higher Education] is on the threshold of being transformed through the application of learning technologies. Are we on the brink of a new way of learning in HE after a tried and tested formula over 800 years?[8]

The literature suggests that the target generation of undergraduates (commonly known as the Net Generation) is comfortable with the use of internet technology. That has led to the incorporation of learning technology to enhance teaching and learning in traditional courses. The subject of learning technology is also considered in the Middle East region,

'like higher education systems all over the world, the United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) higher education system is committed to changing the education system from a traditionally-based one to an information technology-based one[9].

There is ample evidence from available statistical data to support technology in learning in this country, as 75.9% of the UAE population use the Internet[10]. There is recognition in the locality too of the importance of science and technology; the Emirate of Sharjah, led by the Ruler His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qassimi[11], has established initiatives such as University City. Local and international institutions of Higher Education have individual campuses located on a shared educational city area and are supported with a high level of technology. Furthermore, there is support for education in a technological world from the UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, His Highness Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahayan, who recognizes that ‘education has to change.....now with the rapid changes in technology and globalisation’[12]. Research on effective teaching and learning in the country has focused on education and the future needs of the country [13,14,15,16,17,18]. It is not that the UAE has surrendered ‘culture to technology’, but the country does pride itself on its modern structure and reliance on technology in the public sector [19]. Examples of which can be seen in the move to an online portal or e-government initiative, the Official Portal of the Dubai government [20]. Besides being a place of study for international students, the country is their home and it offers future work for them, as well as for an ever increasing population of national citizens and expatriates.

There is evidence of an acceptance of technology as part of the future of the country’s education, leading one to consider the incorporation of learning technology in course design. However, this pedagogical step needs to be taken gently due to a deficit of research about its current use in undergraduate education in the region. There is a lack of research based on students’ feedback as to what they consider of value,

1there is a need for university instructors to investigate how instructional technologies can be used more efficiently and effectively to improve teaching and enhance learning. An essential part of that investigation involves examining students' perspectives on the extensive use of technology in university classrooms[21].

Reservations about incorporating features of learning technology into a course led this author to proceed with some caution. The concern therefore for the teacher was to investigate
1) How effective was the introduction of learning technology?
2) Student perspectives on the use of learning technology.

The research was carried out to gain feedback from international students about their experience with learning technology that had been introduced.

A Community of Learning

A community of learning is built around the concept of connections and collaboration between students. It is a place where learners are brought together to share information and to learn from each other in the creation of new knowledge [22, 23]. Tinto exclaims that the value of a learning community is because learning is better together [24]. The idea of learning communities can be traced back to the idea of communities of practice where educators (as learners) learned about and shared their own best teaching practices with each other [25, 26]. The introduction of a learning community in a
course was thus to base it on a benefit of a community of practice, a closed space for people to be able to learn from each other.

It can be appreciated that students from different cultures will come from many different learning backgrounds, they have been educated in a variety of private or public American, Arab, British, French or Indian schools in the Arab region. Thus students’ expectations of teaching will vary; from teacher as expert, to teacher as a guide; from learning as competition, through to learning as collaboration; some will have had more experience of group learning, others more individual; differing perceptions of learning as a passive or proactive process. A decision to follow a teaching approach to invoke ‘learning community’ as classroom culture was made to unify international students across their diverse cultural expectations of learning. It was a way of establishing that ‘this is the way we do things around here’, a space where students could create knowledge together in a supportive atmosphere [27, 28]. The virtual space was entitled ‘learning community’ in the Learning Management System (LMS), and the teacher referred to it as such in the classroom. Collaborative learning is an effective learning culture that has been shown in the benefits of:

I. Developing a community of peers to increase class participation.

II. Gains perspectives from a variety of learning sources besides teacher as expert.

III. Students view learning differently, as a process of gaining knowledge rather than memorizing it [29].

The introduction of learning technology enabled a virtual learning community to be created to encourage and support student participation, collaboration, and active learning [30, 31, 32].

Learning Technology – Social Media

Educators and students at the University already have access to an LMS through ilearn, a customized version of Blackboard. Other learning management systems are used worldwide in Higher Education, e.g. WebCT and Angel [33]. The LMS is used by management faculty for teaching and learning for a variety of purposes, as data from a Fall, 2010 activity report indicates. The main usage is for the storage of information and content that are subsequently accessed by students - syllabi and presentation slides, for preview and review, are examples of this. Announcements were sent out in 8/11 of the Fall, 2010 courses, to update students on course information. The LMS was used for the submission of assignments and tests. There was little discussion activity registered. To create a blended community of learning required that the LMS be converted to a more active teaching and learning environment.

The electronic media makes it possible for individuals participating within a social space to learn together as they access and share knowledge resources [34]. The transparency in the process of learning brought about by social media is of added value in the teaching and learning experience. Having practiced in the security of the virtual classroom, graduates will be ready to collaborate globally in other bigger, virtual spaces of social media. For social media to work well in the future of management, the students need to feel secure in their use of it. Social media is now fully used in the wider management world, where can be seen examples of managers making effective use of social networks, and the media involved. Human resource managers gather information for recruitment purposes on sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Podcasts are created by the Academy of Management [35], and listened to by busy managers on the go. In management education, computer simulations for shared student practice are made available for teaching purposes [36]. Therefore the application of social media takes the student beyond their university career to the practicalities of the management world.

Detail about the incorporation of particular course activities in this blended community of learning are given in previous writings [37]. I will highlight the main features below as a summary of what was included to introduce a learning community.

1. Social media was introduced for educational purposes - podcasts, video-casts, wiki, blog.
   a. Podcasts were created and shared on the world wide web by the students as evidence of their group discussions and findings about managerial practices [38].
   b. Students worked in groups to create a class book of leadership case studies. These case studies met the need for international students to research about leaders from their own region. The case studies were first created in a wiki in the LMS, the practicality of the wiki is that it is a creative, living, quickly editable and shared document. The finished book of case studies was then posted to a blog on the world-wide-web in an effort to share their learning with the global community [39].
   c. Blogging was used to support learning in the community. To shape their work, the students blogged about their chosen leadership project in online discussion, and received comments back from student peers, as well as the teacher [40]. The introduction of such learning technology can promote teamwork amongst students as they work on collaborative projects. Students take ownership of their work as they work together in a transparent learning environment facilitated by peer review when editing wikis and blogs.
2. The active use of a grade book - updated after each assignment, showing moving average and formative feedback for each assignment.
3. Research - use of the virtual library in class, links to external sources, open laptop exams to include sources [41].
4. Discussions - face to face and continued online.

We will now move on to discuss the research that was undertaken to gain student feedback on increase in learning technology used. The research focuses on receiving data from students about their learning, leading to course adaption to further enhance that learning.

**Research Methodology**

In many universities, there is an opportunity at the end of each semester for students to evaluate their courses, e.g. 50% of students in the School of Business and Management at this university completed such a survey at the end of Fall Semester, 2009. These end of semester surveys ask students to answer about twenty questions, on a 1-5 scale, but the surveys do not usually, and nor did the end of semester survey at this institution particularly consider learning technology. The end of semester survey results therefore, are unhelpful in reviewing a course for its innovations. Plus such surveys do suffer from a timing issue; that being the end of a semester, they are post teaching events. Interestingly, end of semester course evaluations are duped ‘unloved creatures’ and there are projects for their reform [42].

Those semester end surveys completed by students in one class, only raise pointers for teaching and learning that can be addressed for the next cohort. A concern arises when a new approach using learning technology has been introduced; that the end of a semester could be too late to adapt matters for the current cohort. If the use of learning technology was not acceptable to the students, then the teaching methodology would need to be revised quickly. The administration of the survey was therefore purposefully timed just after Mid Semester for three reasons. Firstly, if adjustments to the course were needed, they could be made in time to positively affect the teaching and learning during the rest of the Semester. Secondly, the survey was timed after the Mid Semester exam results, to avoid bias resulting from exam ‘nerves’. Thirdly, a survey was conducted to ameliorate a lack of particular data collection about the impact of changes in a course.

The survey was aimed to obtain narrative feedback from students about their individual perceptions of the course. The survey title, by utilizing the question areas (love, challenge, loathe, comfort), was named the LCLC (pronounced “Elsie, Elsie”). The questions asked were:

- What do I love about the (name of course) so far?
- What do I find challenging about (name of course) so far?
- What do I loathe about the (name of course) so far?
- What do I find comforting about the (name of course) so far?

The number of questions was kept to four, deliberately few, so as to encourage students to answer and to minimize their time in responding. To avoid confusing students about the nature of this LCLC survey, it was explained that it was for the professors’ use to improve the existing course, and that they would still have the opportunity to complete an end of semester course evaluation. It was not mentioned specifically that students’ views on the use of technology was part of the interest. The reason learning technology was not overtly stated was to avoid fixating the students’ perceptions that an increase in technology into their course was ‘unusual’. The completion of the LCLC was voluntary, and was not a graded component of the course. Confidentiality was maintained for the students, any responses were hidden from their classmates, and the teacher was not privy to students’ individual returns. The survey was administered in English, an appropriate language given that all teaching is conducted in English and the level of English competency is that of a senior level undergraduate.

The mid semester learning survey was responded to by 51/122 students (42%) of the students in six undergraduate sections during 2009-2010 (Table 1). This author piloted the LCLC in three courses, mid semester, Fall, 2009, when it was completed by 27/73 students (36%) of the students in three undergraduate courses, a 13/44 response (30%) from two sections of MGT 301 (Organizational Behavior), and a 14/29 response (48%) from one section of MGT 303 (Management & Leadership Development). The second round of LCLC was completed, mid semester, Spring, 2010. The LCLC 2nd round was completed by 24/49 students (49%) of the students in three undergraduate courses, a 6/16 response, (38%) from one section of MGT 301 (Organizational Behavior), and 18/33 response (54%) from two sections of MGT 303 (Management & Leadership Development).
Table 1. Profile of the learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th># of students enrolled</th>
<th># of survey responses</th>
<th>% of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009, OB, Section i</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009, OB, Section ii</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009, L</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2010, OB</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2010, L, section i</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2010, L, section ii</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis

A mid semester survey to collect evidence of students’ reaction to technology enhanced learning was a necessary step in course evaluation. To analyze the data, a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach was taken. *Nvivo 9* software for qualitative data analysis helped with the analysis of findings. Each student comment was read and coded (noded in the phraseology of the software). Examples of nodes that arose from the analysis of student comments included; ‘interaction’, ‘discussion’, ‘team’ ‘group’, ‘time’ ‘new’, ‘feedback’. The nodes were then further reviewed in order to classify emerging themes of interest; development, learning community, new styles of teaching/learning; organization. The comments contained many themes e.g. “It is helping me analyze my own abilities as a leader and I am learning ways to overcome my flaws as a leader (ID 3)”. Here for example, a judgment on the part of the researcher decided that the student was talking about her/his own development, and thus a classification of ‘development’ was recognized. Table 2 shows the data collected after a quantitative analysis into themes and nodes of interest by question area (love, challenge, loathe and comfort).
Table 2. Quantitative analysis of survey data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes &amp; Nodes</th>
<th>LOVE</th>
<th>CHALLENGE</th>
<th>LOATHE</th>
<th>COMFORT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development - peer review, feedback.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning community – group, interaction, discussion, group-work</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching style – new things, new theories</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course organization - schedule, dates, time.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated nothing or no difficulty, no response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 gives two example comments from one class of students as illustrative of the variety and richness of data.

Table 3. Extracts from qualitative analysis of survey data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Example comment</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>It is helping me analyze my own abilities as a leader and I am learning ways to overcome my flaws as a leader (ID 3).</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>The professor tries to tell us by such questions' method that it is not your memorizing ability that is important; it is how to be able to find knowledge (ID 4).</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>I like the interactive sessions that we have in class as they bring the content of the chapter to life (ID 2).</td>
<td>Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>I LOVE the topic! Leadership is something that absolutely fascinates me! I LOVE the group work! (ID 1).</td>
<td>Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>The most comforting about the X course is the fact that the professor uses I-Learn frequently ... it is good to find a reliable lingering source that provides guidance and insight on what is needed from our behalf as students (ID 4)</td>
<td>New style of learning/teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>I find it extremely challenging to follow the time restriction and all the citations we have to do (ID 8). The ability to finish up the midterm on time and to meet all the requirements is a challenge (ID11).</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The findings from the LCLC data were most informative for evaluating the acceptance of learning technology by international students. It was illuminating to recognize that students did not cite technology, as such, as a problem in the course. In fact, the use of technology was barely mentioned apart from a positive comment, the most comforting about the X course is the fact that the professor uses I-Learn frequently ... it is good to find a reliable lingering source that provides guidance and insight on what is needed from our behalf as students (ID 4). During the course, the teacher initially showed students how to edit a blog or a wiki, but there was little explanation asked for in the use of technology. From the survey results and from classroom practice, the educator thus recognized that this Net Generation of international students is comfortable enough in accepting technology for educational purposes.

In response to the students’ feedback from the LCLC, there were opportunities for course updates after mid-semester. These updates were supported by learning technology. Students comments revealed a lack of local flavor in the text book examples, “the material of our textbook for this course is too centered on the US and North America” (ID6). In response to such feedback, local issues relating to organizational behavior or leadership were sourced through current material available online in national newspapers [43]. More relevant media about multicultural teamwork and leadership was sourced through online clips available on YouTube [44].

It was necessary though to recognize that there is a challenge for students from an introduction of learning technology, and that challenge relates to time. I find it extremely challenging to follow the time restriction (ID 8). It was apparent in the comments made that students were to some extent enjoying the course work, “I love the variety of assignment...it makes learning and understanding the course content more effective” (ID5). However, there was loathing due to “too many assignments and deadlines to worry about”. It was significant that the introduction of a learning community supported by technology had increased student time in study. Increased time was being spent on finding resources in the virtual library rather than in ‘googleing’, and more time was needed for class reports (wikis). Finding time to keep up with the course was expressed in terms of a challenge because of the expectations of needing to engage outside the class time.

While an educator is impressed by increased time on study tasks, it was recognized that course adaptations would help. Changes were therefore made in the courses in the light of feedback relating to the time being spent on it. More time was allocated for completing questions in the online exams; adjustments were made in the scheduling of assignments; more time was allocated for group project work. A mid-semester survey had thus proved an effective method for gaining feedback about the introduction of learning technology with international students.

Limitations and Implications

The introduction of a blended learning community to international students was an interesting experiment for both teacher and students. The process fit with a comfort with technology of the Net Generation. Learning technology enabled students to share knowledge, and create knowledge together through social media. It was valuable to gain student feedback at mid-semester on the use of learning technology to address issues.

The main limitation of the LCLC survey was that it was not expressly designed to capture comments regarding the use of learning technology. That was arguably a correct stance in that the LCLC had been purposely designed to avoid raising the subject of learning technology as an issue in the first place. However, that was also a limitation as findings regarding technology had to be inferred. Another limitation was teacher as a single actor for multiple roles; course creator; course teacher; survey creator; survey administrator. Although steps were taken to ensure confidentiality, and students were assured that the teacher would not know who said what, the students would no doubt have been constrained by knowing that they would be taught by the same teacher for the rest of the semester. Given that constraint though, it was evident that students did address the ‘loathe’ or ‘challenge’ questions as much as the ‘love’ and ‘comfort’ elements.

The implication of the LCLC was that it was aimed primarily at improving the quality of teaching and learning in a course where learning technology had recently been introduced. The LCLC delivered feedback from incumbent students at a point in the semester where the teacher was able to adapt the course in a just-in-time approach to quality improvement. As students are involved in their own course changes, it will hopefully sustain their interest in their learning. The LCLC was found to be helpful for highlighting issues in a new learning technology approach. The outcome of such a timely intervention allowed course updates to support a ‘better’ fit between learners and their learning potential.

Conclusions

The use of learning technology within the given population of international undergraduate students in a business course was acceptable. Available time is a constraint for students to make use of the opportunities that learning technology offers. As international students are of the age of the Net Generation, an educator no longer needs to be concerned

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about their ability to use learning technology. Instead, the practical concentration can be on the learning application of social media within time parameters. For social media to work well in the future of management, the business undergraduates of today need to feel secure in their use of it. Having practiced in the security of the virtual classroom, future employees will be ready to wander into and to collaborate in other bigger, brighter spaces of social media available on the world-wide-web. The initial phase of using social media effectively is during their management education when undergraduates can practice the possibilities of collaboration and creativity. The reality of learning technology is that it can support a community of learning where active learners can collaborate together to share knowledge. Having learned to share knowledge, this will shape and benefit the business world of the future.

Acknowledgements. The support by the Academy of Management Organization Development and Change Endowment Fund is gratefully acknowledged.

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