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Online Learning Delivered via Blended Problem-Based Learning

Roisin Donnelly

Technological University Dublin, roisin.donnelly@tudublin.ie

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Online Learning Delivered via Blended Problem-Based Learning

Module Tutor: Roisin Donnelly

Learning and Teaching Centre

Dublin Institute of Technology

Roisin.Donnelly@dit.ie

Course and Institution: Online Learning Module on the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level Learning and Teaching; located in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Teaching Strategy: Blended Problem Based Learning approach for 10 weeks.

Students/Participants: 10 lecturers/academic staff members from a variety of higher education institutions from around the Republic of Ireland.

Average Age: mature participants; some are new to teaching in higher education, and some have been teaching for anywhere between 5-25 years.

Background: Eclectic Mix: many subject disciplines represented: aeronautical engineering for apprentices, undergraduate marketing, home economics for teacher education, nurse tutoring, electrical engineering for apprentices, IT Staff Development, Science Librarian, IT inservice teaching, undergraduate hotel and catering management, professional cookery for apprentices.

Pre-Module Questionnaire distributed to discover the following information about the participants:

- Virtual Learning Environment: their Access to the Internet, preferred time of access
- Basic IT Skills: word processing, email etc
- Internet Skills: navigating web browsers, using search engines etc
- Prior Knowledge/Experience about the area of designing online learning, participating in asynchronous or synchronous discussions
- Preferred method of working: individually/independently, small group work
- Motivation for doing the module

Rationale for Blended Strategy

For the first two years of this module, it had been delivered entirely online; specific problems developed with this approach have been outlined in Donnelly (2004a)

In the light of these problems, it was decided to adopt a blended approach to delivery in that weekly face-to-face problem-based learning tutorials would be supported by online learning events e.g. exploration of online resources, collaborative research, online reflective journaling, self and peer assessment.

Activities/Technologies

WebCT was the OLE used. The module web site was the hub that held the participants together outside of the once weekly f2f PBL tutorial. The activities were designed to

scaffold the participant's learning: they began with a few individual activities, moved to pair work, then to working collaboratively in groups of four.

Factors Critical to Success

Problem complexity; language and communication; right mix of group vs individual learning; role of the tutor in the blend.

It is this last area that I am particularly interested in investigating further with regards to blended learning and teaching. A hugely important area in any form of face to face and PBL delivery is the role of the tutor; in an e-learning environment, it is even more crucial. As an educational developer and course tutor in higher education, whilst working with academic staff, I encounter issues in this module that uses a blended problem-based learning delivery method. The role of the teacher/tutor in blended PBL is both special and crucial for effective learning outcomes and enjoyable learning experiences for students in higher education.

Relevant Papers

Donnelly, Roisin (2004a), The Effectiveness of Teaching 'Online Learning' in a Problem-based Learning Classroom Environment in Maggi Savin-Baden and Kay Wilkie (Eds.) *Challenging Research into Problem-based learning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Donnelly, Roisin (2004b), Online Learning in Teacher Education: Enhanced with a Problem-based Learning Approach. *AACEJ*. Issue 3.

Donnelly, Roisin (2004c), Different Thinking Hats: The Continuously-Evolving Role of the Instructor in E-Problem Based Learning (E-PBL). ED-MEDIA World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications, Switzerland, June 23-28

Donnelly, Roisin (2003), An Online Dilemma: The Pull of Individuality Pitched Against Peer Collaboration in an Online Problem-based Learning Group. ED-MEDIA World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications, Hawaii, USA June 23-28

Donnelly, Roisin (2001), Combining an Online and Problem-based Approach: with Learning as the Common Denominator. WebCT's 3rd Annual International Conference, Vancouver, June 23-27