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CAN UTILISING SOCIAL NETWORKING DETER THE LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT?

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Abstract

The Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship Programme involves a ten week block release course into a Higher Education Institute. Lecturing on such a course provides challenges for both lecturer and student. Working within a very restrictive time period meant looking for innovative ways to facilitate student revision. Online quizzes were decided upon as a means to interest the students in the revision process in their own time. Google Docs was utilized to produce online module quizzes. The production of the quizzes in this format was user friendly and almost intuitive. A platform was needed to host the quiz. Being cognizant of the power of social media as part of the student's lives, it was decided to utilise Facebook to encourage student participation. A Facebook page was set up and various content such as videos and pictures were uploaded. This produced a favourable response from the students. The quizzes were then introduced through the Facebook platform. The results were surprising as the majority of students did not engage with the quizzes. Reasons cited included student's perception of an invasion by the lecturer into a private, non educational social forum. Emailing the link directly to the students proved more successful with 80% of the students engaging with this revision source and 70% rating it favourably. Further work needs to be done as the preliminary quizzes were of a multiple choice format. Such recitation of facts and the association with a surface approach learning is not the desired outcome. Time is an issue with utilising such innovations as the software requires practice for the user to explore all the possibilities inherent in such tools. This will not be a deterrent as this small research project has proved successful and will be further expanded upon.

Keywords: social networking, Facebook, apprenticeship, painting and decorating.

Introduction

The Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship involves the completion of seven phases that are divided among block release periods alternated with on the job training provided by the employer. Each phase is assessed and must be passed to progress. The block release phases consist of twenty weeks in training centre followed by two periods of ten weeks in an Institute of Technology. I deliver theory modules on the Phase 6 block of Painting & Decorating which is a ten week block and is the penultimate stage of the apprenticeship programme. Ten weeks is restrictive and pressurised as much material must be covered and exams have to be done. The previous apprenticeship system involved a four year period with one day per week release into an Institute of Technology. As a product of the system I am well aware of its benefits in allowing time for a better quality of learning.

Impetus for Change

The apprenticeship course covers several different and distinct areas. The current specific module content exam is the norm. Assessment undoubtedly drives the learning as the students are only interested in covering the content that is to be assessed. It is a concern that this assessment driven learning is a surface approach to learning. Marton and Saljo [4] classify two different levels of learning processing as surface level processing and deep level processing. Smith and Colby [6] indicate a surface approach to learning as a process that involves a minimum interaction with the task, a focus on memorisation and procedures that do not consist of reflection. The time limit of the course means that there is no time for reflection and memorisation is a requirement due to the newness of the content being covered. The questions on the test are short answer questions and are quite specific leaving no room for conceptual answers. Surface learning is also indicated by an intention to achieve a bare pass (ibid). Achieving a bare pass on the apprenticeship course requires a 70% grade. A lot of content has to be remembered to achieve this grade. It is understandable that the students engage in a surface approach to learning given the course requirements and restrictions.

Research [7] indicates that assessment type can drive the teaching also and I believe this was occurring. The lectures were delivered with a view to deposit the information into the student. The student then sat an exam where they regurgitated the information that had been delivered. The whole process was pressurised with no time for the interactions experienced under the old system of day release. I became very dissatisfied with the apprenticeship course. It became obvious that the term ‘living contradiction’ [5, p. 23] applied to my teaching. In essence my values were being denied by my practice. The contradiction was that the advantages of the old system were well known while at the same time the drawbacks of the new system were apparent. It was part of my educational values to provide time for students to engage in a reflective practice in an effort to manoeuvre them towards a deep approach to learning. It has been pointed out [2] that trying to cover too much content is detrimental to reflective practice. This is the drawback of the current system. In line with my desire to live more fully in the direction of my educational values [5] a decision was made to seek to improve the possibility of study time and reflection for the students.

The Plan

In an effort to try engage the learner with the material and provide time for reflection I decided to try to use online quizzes. I began with some free sample quiz software which was very flexible and easy to use. The free programme produced a document that could only be used on a computer that had the free software installed. It could have been put up online but not without incurring costs. I then came across Google Docs which is free when you create a Google account. It has a facility for producing quizzes and it is also easy to use and very flexible. I designed the quizzes around two modules that I was delivering. I implemented a 'required field' which was the students' name. I also put in an email option at the very end – if the student wanted feedback he or she could enter their email address and I would then correct the paper and email feedback. Google automatically generated a spreadsheet with all questions and the answers on it once the online quiz had been submitted. Only the creator of the quiz could access this spreadsheet. Once I had this component established I needed a platform to host the quizzes.

I was well aware of the prevalence of social networking in the lives of the students. I decided to use Facebook as all of the students had accounts and it was free. This social networking site recently surpassed 500 million users worldwide [1]. I set up a page specifically for the painting & decorating section and uploaded content I had from previous classes. This received a positive response from the group. Through the 'Status' link on the Facebook page I introduced the link to the two separate quizzes which meant that a click would bring the student directly to the quiz. Once there, they could begin to answer the questions immediately. The course is a ten week course and this was implemented in week six of the course. The main exam was due to take place in week ten.

Results and Discussion.

I showed the students that the quizzes were now online and available to use. I checked regularly to see if either quiz had been submitted. A week passed with no activity. I reminded the students that the quizzes were available. While nobody submitted a quiz during this period there was still interaction on the Facebook page with several comments and 'Likes' going up about various pictures and videos. Another week passed and the course was now entering week eight.

I became concerned and took the group to a computer lab and give them the time to submit one of the quizzes. Once this was completed I had a spreadsheet with all the answers on it. When I looked at the spreadsheet it became obvious that some students did not take it seriously. Some of the answers were ridiculously wrong and in some cases students had answered 'I was out that day' and 'You didn't cover this with us.' I was not too disheartened as I believed that the next time around the group would be more prepared for the quiz and the quality of answers would be better. There was still two weeks left in the course and I was hopeful that the quizzes would be utilised again now the class had seen how easy it was to use. A few days passed and nobody had submitted a form meaning nobody had used the quizzes. I decided to email the link directly to the students. This avoided them having to go through Facebook to access it. This proved more successful with twelve out of fifteen students or 80% submitting a form.

I canvassed the class for feedback. A total of 15 questionnaires were given out and 15 returned. The response rate was 100%. The questionnaire used the rating 1 for disagree and 5 for agree. There was a comment section under each question for feedback. See Figure 1 below.

	Question	Agree		Don't Know		Disagree
		5	4	3	2	1
1.	The provision of an online quiz is useful as a revision aide.	80%		6.7%		13.3%
2.	Facebook is a suitable platform to host the quiz.	6.7%				93.3%
3.	Emailing a link directly to the student is more effective than using Facebook	67%		19.8%		13.2%

Question 1:

There was overwhelming agreement – 80% or 12 out of 15 - with the statement that the provision of an online quiz was a useful revision aide. Some of the comments were 'Good idea' and 'Right way to go.' The respondent who replied 'Don't know' indicated that the answer would be better answered after the exam at which point he could determine if it had been useful. The respondents who disagreed made comments like 'Print it out for us' and 'Once I go online I get distracted too easy'.

Question 2

There was overwhelming disagreement – 93.3% or 14 out of 15 respondents - with the use of Facebook as platform to host the quiz. This surprised me as I believed I was providing an access point that students were familiar with and would enhance the probability of their engagement. Some of the comments were 'Facebook is a social network not a learning network' and 'keep learning for the classroom.' Generally the tone was angry. Again the fact of being online seemed to cause a problem with one respondent saying 'How do you expect us to use this on Facebook? Our friends are chatting to us.' The respondent who agreed with the question was more conciliatory and wrote 'Facebook is for everyone, don't listen to the haters.'

Question 3

This statement was supported by 67% or 10 out of 15 of the respondents. Comments included the following 'We could print it ourselves' and one respondent wrote 'I didn't feel stupid answering the questions.' The 19.8% who indicated 'Don't know' were the three who did not submit a form even when emailed directly. The remaining 2 or 13.2% who disagreed left the comment section blank.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this was a small scale research project involving 15 students. One of the reasons for engaging in this work was to provide time for flexible study and revision and in the process provide feedback to the students on a revision paper. However, it could have backfired. Some students may not have engaged in the process for fear of looking stupid or being embarrassed through the feedback that I would provide. Part of my rationale for carrying it out in this manner was so I could determine how many had used the revision aide. In hindsight this may have worked counter productively as fear of looking silly may have proved to be a negative factor in using the quiz. There is a facility within Google Docs for providing the answers automatically as soon as the form is submitted. It would require extra work to do but it would avoid the lecturer having to provide feedback and therefore remove some of the perceived embarrassment by the student. I intend to use that mechanism the next time.

Despite the disappointing results I fully intend to continue exploring this avenue. Provision of feedback to the students is a hallmark of a good teacher and is something I believe is vital to the learner. In this instance it could be that utilising social networking can deter the learners' engagement but there are many variables involved and the results from this will not deter further engagement with social networking as a learner's tool. It is fair to say that from the results of this research social networking is not the answer but it may provide another weapon in the armoury of the educator.

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