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# DEVELOPING ONLINE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT HOW STUDENTS APPROACH ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS: ENHANCING REFLECTION AND PRACTICE FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS.

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This small-scale project involved a team of staff from the Centre for Labour Market Studies. An action research approach was used to develop new learning resources to support student's understanding of how to approach an assignment question. The objective of this project was to have a set of online resources that can take students through the steps of critically analysing an assignment question, understanding what it is asking them to do, then proceeding on to creating an effective assignment plan they can submit to tutors for formative feedback. Prior to this project being undertaken, all study skills and course materials at CLMS were provided in a primarily paper-based format. Some CLMS students also attend face-to-face workshops at twice-yearly optional teaching days, in a limited range of locations worldwide, or sought advice on a one-to-one basis. This project aims to create additional, supplementary resources that make use of new technologies to provide an alternative, interactive learning tool. The online assignment tutorial takes students through a number of steps in order to build a firm basis for critical understanding and action. It should be noted that the tutorial is accessible to all distance learners across the CLMS courses (Undergraduate, MSc, DSocSci) and is designed in a format that supports a wide range of learning styles.

## 1. BACKGROUND

The project was carried out by the CLMS Technologies Group, a small team of CLMS academics and support staff who were interested in exploring opportunities to develop additional forms of support and resources for distance learning students beyond what was currently offered. As part of this the CLMS Technologies group then explored new ways to use technologies, such as podcasts and audio visual tutorial sessions, in order to support student progress, learning and understanding in the context of course, departmental, College and University of Leicester teaching and learning strategy. The activities undertaken were above and beyond what the department currently provides for distance learners, since CLMS' courses have always focused primarily on paper-based materials with some use of Blackboard as an optional support resource (e.g. accessing key documents, submitting assignments on some courses, discussion boards, useful links). The aim of this project was to draw on these new technologies in order to create new resources that go beyond this provision, and to make the Blackboard element of the course (which is supplementary and not an obligatory activity for students) more attractive, whilst providing an alternative form of support that helps to meet the diverse needs of distance learning students.

The CLMS Technologies team initially started as an informal activity and as a group of individuals who were interested in providing extra support resources via the use of technology. The outcomes of these meetings then became more formal and the team began to report to the departmental Learning and Teaching Committee in order to outline their achievements and future plans. As such, the CLMS Technologies group was more central in the department. Already in place through the work of the Group are newly developed resources on Blackboard: 1) podcasts on Frequently Asked Questions (e.g. related to distance learning and how to start using the course materials), 2) CLMS podcasts and videos which provide useful information on the University of Leicester and the Department, and 3) links to general podcasts with course-related materials from a range of trusted international sources. It was around this time and during a meeting that the group then identified further areas that would benefit from the development of technology-based resources. It was through this reflective discussion that the issue of assignment questions was identified.

The CLMS Technologies Group then spent time considering the key difficulties that students face in distance learning and considered how technology may be used to address these issues. In doing so it became clear that a fundamental reason for assignment failure was that students do not effectively address the issues, or build an argument that clearly answers the question. Failure on an assignment can lead to loss of motivation and students often decide at the point of being awarded a 'fail' grade not to continue with their studies. Consequently, assisting students to understand what is being asked of them and how to build an argument in response to a question was deemed not only to facilitate higher levels of academic performance across the programmes, but also to help contribute to the improved retention and completion rates of CLMS distance learning students.

As previously stated, CLMS currently provides paper-based written resources for students across the CLMS distance learning courses. In addition, face-to-face workshops on assignment writing at our twice-yearly teaching days in Hong Kong, UK, UAE and Malta, are also offered but it should be noted that these are of optional attendance only and many students never attend such workshops. As such, there are access issues for these particular distance learning students who cannot/choose not to attend teaching days. Making this newly developed online assignment tutorial and planner available will therefore mean that there is a **resource for all students to access** at anytime during their studies.

## 2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the project was to support the development of the students' understanding of how to approach an assignment question – e.g. what does it ask you to do, why, and how will you approach it – but also enabling them to submit a meaningful outline of their planned approach. Prior to this project being launched, some students opted to submit a proper outline for comment, others simply sent probing questions because they were uncertain about how to choose a question or how to start their work, whilst others chose to submit a complete draft only to be told that they have not really understood what the question was asking them to do (e.g. overlooking the key terms in the question). Thus, providing this online resource has led to a reduced element of 'hit and miss' in current student approaches, enabling academics to make meaningful formative remarks on clearer outlines of the planned work, and ultimately making the whole process more effective for students and staff alike. It is vital to remember that formative assessment is an important but often overlooked element of effective learning (Yorke, 2001), and something that our students have not necessarily sought in an effective way. The creation of this online resource has meant that we are now able to cater for a range of learning styles. Evidence suggests that a variety of learning styles exist and it is important for education to accommodate these alternative forms of learning (e.g. Honey and Mumford, 1982; Hawk and Shah, 2007). We would argue that individuals usually combine these learning styles in different levels, rather than fitting into one clear-cut category. As such, the online resource that has been developed complements this belief and is able to offer useful study skills information in an alternative format to the paper-based materials that CLMS courses have primarily relied on in the past.

## 3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

1. The implementation of an online learning resource that supports students in how to approach an assignment question (Breeze online assignment tutorial, Plone hosted assignment planner that students can submit for comment); encouraging student progression and putting procedures in place to reduce and combat assignment failure;
2. Development opportunities for the team in terms of capacity-building, training in use of Breeze, Adobe Presenter, Audacity, Photoshop, experience of research and working as part of a reflective research team, opportunity to engage in reflective practice;
3. Enhanced student progress and learning by supporting better understanding of how to approach an assignment question and develop an assignment plan for feedback, facilitating access to effective formative feedback, better access to interactive support, resources to support wider range of learning styles;
4. Further integration of effective and targeted new technologies in CLMS teaching provision;
5. A transferable resource (with minor adaptation) for use by other departments across the University.

In addition, in order to ensure that learning provision was relevant and of high quality, as well as improving the retention levels, we have recognised that it is important to make effective connections between research and teaching practice (Jenkins *et al*, 2005) and to identify meaningful opportunities for reflective practice. It is apparent that this project has provided this opportunity for teaching staff, however, it has also helped to engage and benefit support staff, who are essential partners in the provision of distance learning. For example, support staff are very often the first and

most regular point of contact for CLMS students. As such, they are able to feed into the understanding of student needs, but will also benefit from the opportunity to be part of a team reflecting on departmental provision and practice. Some of the academic and support team members in the team were less familiar with being involved in research projects, so this project has also enabled new opportunities for personal development to occur. Finally, staff training had to be undertaken to use Breeze, Adobe Presenter, Photoshop, Audacity so that the technological requirements of the project could be achieved.

The online tutorial was also piloted with a range of CLMS students who were studying on varying courses, intakes and also in different countries in order to establish a fair representation of the CLMS student body and also to gain their reactions to this newly developed resource. The results from the pilot were both pleasing and encouraging. Some examples of the responses received are outlined below which provide relevant evidence that the student learning experience was enhanced from this project:

*"Thank you for forwarding this pilot tool to me. I found it a good summary of what was covered in the AWS and the Student Guidelines and think that the 'on-line' nature of it will be extremely useful; no more wading through papers trying to find the section on 'operational' terms. I particularly like the fact that you don't have to go through the whole tutorial and that there is the option to select any step at any stage."*

**CLMS MSc Distance Learning students: UK.**

*"Thanks for sharing the below link with me. I thought this is very useful and interactive for long distance students including myself. I have summarised my thoughts below for your reference:*

*Positives:*

- Very interactive yet informative.*
  - It helps to break down thoughts and ideas for students*
  - It helps students to really think about the question(s) before they go straight into it.*
- ...Generally speaking, I think this is a really good tool to help students in preparing/writing their assignment."*

**CLMS MSc Distance Learning students: Hong Kong.**

*"Thanks for the tutorial and I think anything is useful which will help us to prepare for our assignment as we are very much on our own out here and it is not easy to be self directed...carry on with the good work as it will benefit us "*

**CLMS MSc Distance Learning students: Italy.**

## 4. EVALUATION

Overall the project went well and numerous benefits emerged which are outlined in the 'Project Outcomes and Achievements' section above. However, when undertaking a project again of this nature it would be worth considering the following issues:

**1) The Allocation of Time** – The CLMS Technologies team members are a voluntary group of staff interested in finding out about and using new and alternative teaching methods to support and enhance the student learning experience. As such, this means that the work undertaken by the group is always above and beyond the normal functions of their daily roles and duties. As a consequence, allocating sufficient time to this project and coordinating staff diaries was sometimes problematic. This in turn meant that meetings could sometimes be hard to arrange and instances

occasionally occurred where the team had not been able to progress or move forward for quite a while. Due to this it sometimes meant that the team would have to spend quite a lot of the time at the beginning of a meetings recapping on the advancements that had been made and refreshing our memories about the varying software that we were also trying to adapt to and use. On reflection, we therefore felt that the allocation of a block of time would have been more straightforward and less time consuming rather than revisiting and repeating work.

**2) IT and Technical Problems** – As the group was using unfamiliar software we predicted that we would experience some difficulties in this area. To address this, some group members attended training on Breeze and Adobe software. While this training proved very beneficial there were sometimes incidences where specific technical problems arose in the online tutorial that the team could not deal with. As a consequence, we established that it is not always clear which University staff member or department should be approached with regard to the specific problems that we experienced. For example, we found out that structured training courses for Breeze and Adobe are provided but getting assistance with individual technical problems is more difficult and not straightforward.

**3) Roles with the Team** – The allocation of tasks within the group could have also been organised more effectively. For example, the team had a tendency to make decisions and do everything together. At the time it was felt that taking this approach was suitable as everyone wanted to be involved at all stages of the project and contribute and share ideas at all levels. However, this then meant that progress was quite slow. In reflection, we felt that it would have been more valid to look at individual team members strengths and what they could contribute to the team.

## 5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

It is hoped that we will also be able to develop a range of linked resources that compliment this online tutorial. This will in turn provide a stepped approach and a form of scaffolding to support student learning and effective progress towards independent study skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, these resources on the assignment question and approaching the assignment should also complement the existing Critical Thinking Tutorial developed by the Student Support and Development Services (SSDS). This type of method can be classified as a ‘practical’ action research approach, which arises from the concerns of practitioners, with interaction with ‘end users’ (rather than students being a member of the team, for practical reasons):

The practitioner aims to act more wisely and prudently, so the outcomes and longer-term consequences of the practice will be for the best. Such a stance requires treating the others involved [e.g. students and other staff] not as objects but as subjects capable of speech and action, and as persons who will also live with the consequences of what is done. The practitioner in such a case might still be the one who decides what is to be explored and what changes are to be made, but in practical action research she or he remains open to the views and responses of others, and the consequences that these others experience as a result of the practice. In this case, there is a transitive, reciprocal relationship between the practitioner and others involved in and affected by the practice. (Kemmis, 2009: 470)

In addition, this approach is also based on the understanding that we have and will also continue to gather a range of feedback from students regarding the assignment writing process, through our respective roles when teaching and supporting our students.

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