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ENHANCING ON-LINE TEACHING AND LEARNING – LEARNERS’ FEEDBACK FOR A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODULE

OUM Business School, Open University Malaysia

Abstract

In an ODL setting, engaging learners become very challenging especially for those who have not been exposed to this type of learning before. Many people assume that because most ODL students are adult learners, they are independent and can easily survive on their own. However, high attrition rates, high failure rates and the small number of learners who actually graduate with high academic performance tend to negate this assumption. The question thus arises of how we can enhance our teaching and learning and assist learners in their studies. What can be done to engage them and help them understand their subject matter better? What would attract them and get them to apply the principles that they have learned? What can be done to increase their critical thinking skills so that they would be able to meet expectations? What would help them learn better in their limited available time? This research focuses on these questions by using a strategic management module as a testing ground to get feedback from learners in OUM Business School. A group of learners were given access to the module and the feedback received analysed using thematic analysis. Results of the study show what learners prefer and what could be better improved to enhance teaching and learning in the university.

Keywords

Quality, Teaching and Learning, On-Line Learning, Engaging Learners

Introduction

In an ODL setting, engaging learners become very challenging especially for those who have not been exposed to this type of learning before. Many people assume that because most ODL students are adult learners, they are independent and can easily survive on their own. However, high attrition rates, high failure rates and the small number of learners who actually graduate with high academic performance tend to negate this assumption. The question thus arises of how we can enhance our teaching and learning and assist learners in their studies.

Statement of Problem

Su (2011) stated that the knowledge, skills and competences that students acquire in higher education are undoubtedly important for enabling students to cope with the uncertainties that life offers. Students should be fully engaged in order to sustain learning activities. In this fast changing world, higher education curricula and pedagogy need to emphasise the ideas of lifelong learning and its importance (Candy and Crebert 1991; Knapper and Cropley 2000). This is the basis of this research where a newly developed module is assessed to gauge whether it is acceptable to learners and would help them in their daily and future life.

Literature Review

E-learning has become widely used in conventional education, continuing education, and corporate training because of its flexibility, richness, and cost-effectiveness (Mahafzah, 2012).

Jarvis (2008) stated that the art of teaching is still possible in distance education through the people who design the teaching and learning process. According to him, the art of teaching lies in our empathising with the learners and thus entering into an interpersonal relationship with them. Teachers and designers have to embrace a human perspective, learn of methods, experiment with them and develop techniques using the available methods (Jarvis, 2008).

Learners generally do not care about the technologies behind the process but they expect their communications, information and services to improve their learning within the constraints of their lifestyle as adult distance learners (Gallagher, 2007). As global conditions continue to transform, universities will face continuing and increasing rates of change and higher education institutions will need to compete in a competitive, market-driven environment (Graham, 2012). Ultimately, students and institutions both have responsibilities for the quality of student learning. Students need to work hard to develop their own knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning (Axelson and Flick, 2011).

Optimizing the usability of e-learning materials is necessary to maximize their potential educational impact, but this is often neglected when time and other resources are limited, leading to the release of materials that cannot deliver the desired learning outcomes (Davids, Chikte and Halperin, 2013).

User testing, which involves a small number of participants, may be an effective and efficient way of improving the usability of e-learning materials (Davids, Chikte and Halperin, 2013).

THE DEVELOPMENT of engaging e-learning materials for students and professionals in the health sciences is often resource intensive. It therefore becomes critical to evaluate and optimize these materials to maximize their educational impact user testing, with each involving a small number of participants, may be an effective and efficient way of improving the usability of e-learning materials (Davids, Chikte and Halperin, 2013)..

Development evaluation of E-learning courses involves analyzing every component of course development, including the course material design, E-learning platform, course website design, learning resource, student-student interactions, Assessment, and Tutors. Evaluating of elearning teaching process should include the following six dimensions: technical support, website utilization, learning interaction, learning evaluation, learning support, and flexibility. Product evaluation measures the learners' satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, learning effectiveness, and sustainability, which depend on the results of the abovementioned analyses (Mahafzah, 2012).

It is evident that the way in which the course is presented is very important (Martin et al, 2001):

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative approach where a group of learners were asked to evaluate a new module in Strategic Management. The learners were given the on-line module and asked to answer a series of open ended questions. These questions were formulated based on Martin et. al.'s (2001) recommended questions on how to evaluate course content. These included questions in relation to whether the learners found the course interesting and whether they got what they wanted from the course. Learners were also asked whether they found the course materials professionally presented, easy to learn from and free of error. Additional questions included whether the learners thought the materials were up to date and whether each part of the course linked well with the other parts of the course.

Learners were also asked to what extent the module required them to (Martin et al, 2001):

- a. Memorize facts/concepts/procedures
- b. Understand concepts/ideas/principles
- c. Analyse data/description/arguments
- d. Synthesize and put together ideas
- e. Evaluate using your own judgement/values
- f. Apply your learning to your own experience/life/job

Getting feedback from the learners was important as it would enable the faculty to ascertain the quality of the module and attached learning materials. This is done to ensure that the highest return-on-investment is gained and promote a positive perception of the university's online learning. Some of the following factors were also used for evaluation of the module in order to examine the effectiveness of online learning as suggested by Yakovelli (2012):

- a. Instructional design especially the content and learning objectives. The learning objectives should be in line with the course objectives and reflect the level of the actual content.
- b. Level of interactivity i.e. the different combination of ways in which learners engage in the content, for example scrolling through the pages, clicking to assess an attached case and article.

- c. Visual impact of the module and content i.e. its attractiveness to the learners. Here we look at whether they reflect the brand of the module, and whether the graphics and text are relevant.
- d. Language – whether the language is clear and appropriate for the target learners.
- e. Technical functions which include whether the hyperlinks work and the content is displayed correctly.
- f. Time for learners to read the module and the attention span they take.

Findings and Discussion

The first question asked was whether the group found the module to be interesting and if so, why. All the respondents answered positively and some of their answers include the following:

Yes. I always believe that strategy in any contexts is a frame of mind. Being competent in managing strategies is critical for employees and organizations.

It was ok, my lecturer made it more interesting as she got us all involved in the session.

Yes, compact and crystal clear. Students should be ready to enter examination halls by just reading the module.

Yes. It is easy to understand, using simple language, abridged and compress

Respondents were then asked whether they enjoyed reading the module and which parts they particularly like. The answers varied and included the content, the examples, the learning outcomes, activities and self-check and summary.

When asked whether the learners got what they wanted from the module, all of them answered yes. These are some of the answers that they gave:

Yes, I managed to execute my assignment and bring what that was thought to work.

Yes. If the final exam questions is based on this module, I believe the students will not have difficulties in scoring the subject.

Yes. Gain knowledge. Practice in real life. Practice in workplace

The following answers were given on whether the learners found the materials in the module convenient to handle:

Set aside a few business buzzwords, models, or technical terms, the overall content is “student-friendly” with clear explanations and examples.

Nothing to explain, as told indirectly before all the module are good enough.

Yes, plain English. Comments on videos. Some are too short (26sec), I think the tutor has to replay the clips few times in the class before students can catch it.

This material makes easier to me for revising before and after class.

Learners were also asked whether the materials in the module were professionally presented. Most answered yes while one respondent said that the presentation of content could be further improved. When asked whether they found the module as a whole easy to learn from, the respondents answered positively with some of the answers highlighted below:

The module is a gist of the “Strategic management: A competitive advantage approach, concepts and cases”. The book is a good reference, but a summarized version is even helpful to digest.

Yes all the modules were easy to understand very systematically presented

Yes, KISS concept.

Yes. This module included all chapters from main text book. This module also summarized all chapter from main text book in simple words added with self-check and activities that we can easy to understand this subject.

Learners were also asked to identify if they found any errors. Most found the module to be free of error while one respondent could not access one of the attached article. With regards to the content of the materials, all learners agreed that the material attached was up to date. They also agreed that each part of the module linked well or appropriately to the rest of it.

Learners also found that the exercises and activities were easy to follow and helpful as shown below:

Yes, through the exercises given was able to gauge proper solutions in similar situation personally and at work.

Yes, except 1 duplicate exercise found and 1 short video and student to suggest appropriate strategy.

Longer video I supposed?

Yes. I can use this module in during my study as well as in my workplace

The embedded videos were also useful but some found them to be too short and requested longer insertions. Learners said that the cases were easy to understand and useful in preparing them for the assignments as highlighted here:

A number of case studies in this module will definitely help the students engage with the material and gain an international perspective on strategic management. Some local cases, especially on relevant business turnaround strategies (e.g. Malaysia Airlines) and low cost airlines (e.g. Air Asia) will also be of assistance to the students.

Yes there were, simple when one visualizes a situation instead of just reading about it ,they would tend to understand it better. That open new gateways in doing my assignments.

Well, I tend to agree on this one. Some of the students (including me sometimes) did not go thru the thick text book to understand the key concept or the jist of the subject and end up did not really answer the assignment questions. By reading module, easy to spot by flipping thru the modules.

Easy for me to do assignment on time

Learners also understood the learning objectives and found them to be “on target”. Most also agreed that they were engaged in the content especially after watching the embedded videos. They also said that they could interact and discuss with the friends the exercises and activities in the module.

The answers to the question “Does the module look engaging and professional? Do you think it is suitable for you and your classmates?” varied as shown below:

I am of the opinion that OUM Business School should consider a new template, by not adapting a school text book feature.

Yes it does.

To me professionalism in looks of the module doesn't carry weight, but professionalism in the person after understanding the content of the module is what that counts.

Of course yes. No major typos and confusing statements.

Yes

Learners found that the language used was easy to understand and nice to read – straightforward and perfect! They also found that the examples and scenarios given were relevant to their studies and work. When asked about the length of the module, all agreed that it was acceptable – concise and appropriate. One respondent did remark that the classes should be longer.

The learners also gave the following recommendations to improve the module and attached materials:

The topics should focus more on how strategy is currently practiced from commercial and entrepreneurial perspectives. It should also provide a wide variety of contexts from public service to social entrepreneur and not-for-profit organizations.

New innovative and more interesting methods should be introduced.

More graphics

More colorful

More question or exercise

Suggestion references

As stated before, the aim of the study was to increase the quality of learning to a higher standard according to the different levels of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. A significant implication for online teaching and learning is that learning can be orchestrated by the learner independently. In this case, the learner can choose to watch the video, go through the module content, work on questions or discuss with other learners in the forum. This is in line with what was proposed by Zydney and Hasselbring (2014) (a) a narrative story given through the video visually (b) a generative format enables students to discover the problems and sub-problems that need to be solved via exercises and discussion questions (c) data embedded within the video and slides which learners can use to solve the exercises and assessment questions (d) the problems presented are complex with multiple steps and include both relevant and irrelevant data that students need to decipher between and transfer their knowledge.

Basically, the module used the concept of mini anchors for learning as shown in the UDL framework below:

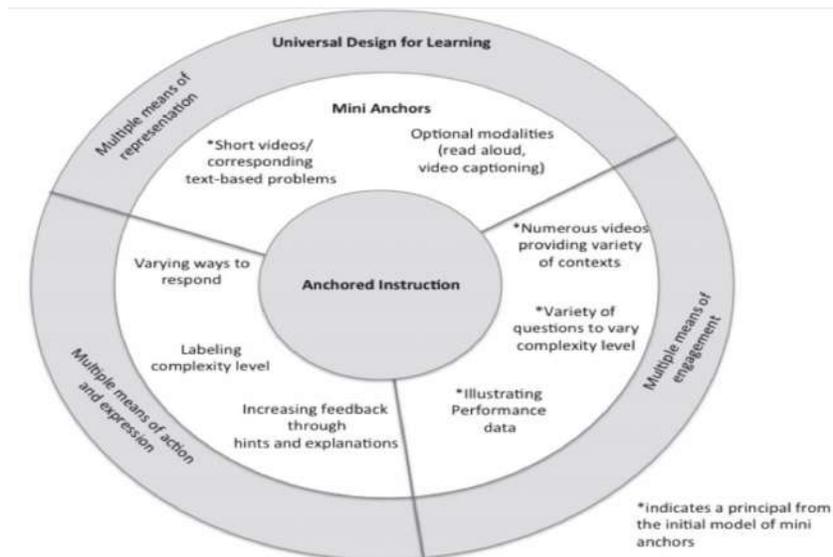


Figure 1: The UDL Framework combined with mini anchors

As shown in Figure 1, this initial model of mini anchors recommended (a) using short video narratives with embedded data and corresponding text-based problems, (b) offering numerous videos to illustrate the

same content in multiple ways across a variety of contexts, (c) presenting a variety of questions for each section to adjust the complexity levels to provide challenges and assistance based on learner needs

Conclusion

The study was an exploratory study which looked at a specific module developed. The module included embedded videos, attached case studies, exercises and activities tailored to engage learners and increase their level of interactivity. This module was different from the normal modules in that it incorporated all the learning materials together with the objective of simplifying the adult learners' study process and cutting short the different processes involved if the materials were scattered in different sections of an on-line system. Overall, learners were happy with the module and satisfied with the content. Based on this, it is suggested that more modules be developed to improve teaching and learning.

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