Using Moodle as a means for enabling student collaboration

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Background

In 2010, Moodle replaced Sixth Net as the VLE of the college I work at. A recent survey showed that at present, 73% of staff in the college use Moodle to upload files for students to access from home, to create web links for them to research independently, or to compose quizzes for them to answer. In other words, Moodle is used in a passive way. Only 18% of staff use Moodle's more dynamic functionality, in which the student is actively engaged in generating content for themselves, in the form of wikis, forum contributions, and database entries. I set out to test and evaluate the effectiveness of such functions for teaching and learning in AS English literature, in the hope that others would begin to use them in their own subjects and assess whether they could be viable learning tools.

Starting point

I was intrigued by an article published by the Daily Telegraph in 2009 which claimed that teenagers spend around 31 hours a week in front of a computer, mostly on the internet. These 'digital natives' spend "some three and a half hours communicating with friends on MSN, and around two hours on YouTube and in chat rooms." One possible explanation for the popularity of the social media mentioned in the article (such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube) is that the content of these sites is principally user-generated. These sites enable people to create, edit and publish their life to the world, and thus arguably empower them to choose whom they wish to invite to participate in it. VLEs such as Moodle employ the same web 2.0 based interactive platforms which young people enjoy using in their free time. It seemed, therefore, that a VLE like Moodle might be able to not only organise the life of

the college, but also offer an alternative, more dynamic way of students taking an active role in their learning.

Teaching and learning processes

I chose to focus on three of my AS English literature groups, and I began by trialling Moodle forums as homework tasks. I asked students to respond to extracts from novels and poems. The first forum required all students to comment on the same extracts, whilst the second required them to respond to particular critical views of a poet's work, and then argue in favour of or against that perspective, using evidence from poems to support their views. Having explored the use of forums in a literature setting, I then used wikis as a way of planning coursework essays. Students were put into pairs and expected to work through a series of coursework questions, using relevant extracts from the set novel as evidence to help answer the question. Having completed the first question, they moved on to the next question, which had already been started by another group. They were expected to add their own ideas, and then move on to the third question. The process finished when all groups had commented on each other's questions. This meant that all twenty students in the group had provided ideas for each one of the possible essays, and therefore had an abundance of ideas for any one question which they could choose for their own coursework.

Finally, I used the database function of Moodle as a revision tool for the summer exam. Students could upload the titles of any further reading they had done throughout the year, together with author details, page references and an analysis of a particular extract, so that all students potentially could use this analysis as evidence for their own response in the exam.

Impact

Students' opinions on using the forum function of Moodle to establish co-operative learning revealed an interest in using this technology as a tool for learning, but also insecurities about the level of exposure each individual was open to as a result. Thirty-six out of fifty students (72 %) felt anxious about airing their ideas on the forum, and the most common reason for this was the fear of 'getting it wrong'. But interestingly, the vast majority of students (88%) felt their classmates' contributions to the forum helped them further their understanding of the text, since they had either not thought of the same ideas, or had reassessed their original opinions in the light of opposing evidence. The second forum revealed a more positive response. It seemed that giving students a more dynamic role in the task – getting them to 'talk' to each other via the forum as opposed to just statically writing their opinions up – encouraged a greater feeling of collaboration. Asking whether the second forum felt like a discussion or

just homework, 73% stated it felt more like a dialogue. It was clearly important that students felt not only responsible for the content generation of the forum, but also felt involved in a discussion with others, as opposed to simply adding their contribution to the page.

In terms of the wikis, thirty one out of the thirty-four students (91%) felt like they were directly involved in a collaborative exercise with others. There were a couple of students who claimed that "only some students worked hard", but overall the responses to the wikis were very positive. Many felt much more comfortable with the coursework questions as a result, since they had a variety of ideas to choose from. What came through in the responses to the questionnaires I gave to students was that the wikis made students feel as if they were working as a unit, helping each other generate ideas and plans. Consequently, the overwhelming majority (93%) found the activity useful.

It is hard to establish the impact of collaboration which the database has encouraged since the activity was started late in the summer term just before the exams – in hindsight I would have started this database much earlier. However, part of the exit questionnaire I gave students in their last week of AS study showed that that most of the students found the activity helpful for revision. On a scale of 1-5, twenty-nine out of forty-three students found the database either useful or very useful (4 or 5). Of course, the danger with the database is that only some students upload their further reading to

it, whilst others simply use it as a resource, but contribute nothing themselves. This is a potential difficulty which I need to think about for next year.

Conclusion

In sum, Moodle has some interesting interactive features which can be used to encourage student collaboration. The findings of an exit questionnaire suggested that the students were particularly positive about wikis as a means of discussing and sharing ideas. It seemed to create a feeling of empowerment– having used the wiki, students tended to feel much more confident in approaching the coursework for English literature. The other advantage to the wiki is that it provides anonymity – no-one knows who has uploaded content and who has edited it. Students therefore can act with freedom to express their opinions and ideas without worrying about being judged or 'getting it wrong'. The forums did not provide anonymity and some students reported that they felt frightened about expressing themselves. There was also an issue with feedback: not all students got a response from others, meaning they only had themselves to decide whether what they had said was correct or justifiable. In terms of the database, this is too recent to evaluate, but whilst it seems useful, I would argue that it only encourages students to share ideas and texts whilst the teacher is instructing them to use it.

Contact

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