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Designing and using a learning package for teaching

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Designing and using a learning package for teaching

Abstract

Student Centred Learning' and 'Resource Based Learning' (RBL) seem to be two of the buzz words in tertiary education at the moment. By the year 2000 it is likely that at least 30% of all undergraduate teaching in Australian Universities will involve the use of specially designed learning resources (NCO D E, 1996). According to the literature one of the benefits of RBL is the facilitation of autonomous, reflective learning (NCO D E, 1996). The Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT) subject for academics at Wollongong University aims to facilitate reflective learning and the subject is presently being redesigned to provide a modular program with RBL as one of its features. The intention is to satisfy the diverse needs of participants and to encourage the 'Deep Approach' to learning identified by Marton & Siiljo (1976) such that participants are motivated to seek meaning rather than simply reproduce information. This article describes some of my experiences in the design and implementation of the first ITT module and offers some suggestions to staff interested in integrating RBL into their courses.

Designing and Using a Learning Package for Teaching

Maureen Bell

Student Centred Learning' and 'Resource Based Learning' (RBL) seem to be two of the buzz words in tertiary education at the moment. By the year 2000 it is likely that at least 30% of all undergraduate teaching in Australian Universities will involve the use of specially designed learning resources (NCODE, 1996). According to the literature one of the benefits of RBL is the facilitation of autonomous, reflective learning (NCODE, 1996). The Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT) subject for academics at Wollongong University aims to facilitate reflective learning and the subject is presently being redesigned to provide a modular program with RBL as one of its features. The intention is to satisfy the diverse needs of participants and to encourage the 'Deep Approach' to learning identified by Marton & Säljö (1976) such that participants are motivated to seek meaning rather than simply reproduce information.

This article describes some of my experiences in the design and implementation of the first ITT module and offers some suggestions to staff interested in integrating RBL into their courses.

The ITT Module

I designed the RBL module *What is Teaching? What is Learning?* as an introduction to some of the basic issues, principles and theories of tertiary teaching. The intention was to provide a self-paced, participant-centred learning experience that stimulates participants to think about their own experiences and link these to the literature on teaching and learning. Participants work through the module at their own pace after negotiating a time frame for completion.

The Module provides a specially designed resource package comprising:

- a handbook of exercises and information
- a book of readings
- a video
- the web site for online discussion
- one face to face discussion session
- regular written feedback.

Six tutors piloted the module at the end of 1996. Reactions were extremely positive and included comments such as "I liked having the time to think about things"; "It was a revelation, I really enjoyed it"; and "It worked well as an individual process". I had not intended to introduce the module into the ITT until the redesigned program began in Spring semester '97, however

as the pilot response was so positive I decided to include it during the Autumn '97 semester.

At the time of writing there are nine ITT participants working with the module and their responses vary from being extremely positive to positive with some reservations. This variety of responses is to be expected from a group comprising very experienced academics and lecturers who have never taught before. Yet it is this variety of responses that I believe poses one of the greatest challenges for RBL methodology. How can a single learning package meet the individual needs of a variety of students?

Initially I had thought to 'individualise' the module by providing a choice of pathways within it but I soon became concerned that these choices might be illusory. After all there is a limit to the number of options that may be provided and the available choices would still be predetermined by myself as the module designer. Rather than providing choices I 'individualised' the module by designing exercises in which participants reflect on their own learning experiences and teaching practice, and link these reflections to theoretical approaches.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The pilot study indicated that the major advantages of this RBL module were related to the provision of written feedback by the module facilitator, the opportunity to spend time thinking deeply about issues, and the individual applicability of experience-based reflection. Some participants indicated the suitability of the RBL approach to their own perceived learning style.

Disadvantages were seen as minor, however two participants did not appreciate the 'flexible delivery' provided by RBL and said they would have preferred the direction and motivation provided by weekly sessions and regular deadlines. One participant said, "*I found not having deadlines difficult.*" This participant also said, "*I'm a real class attending person. I love interaction*". The lack of face to face interaction between participant and participant as well as between participant and facilitator was a negative point for most people, yet none of them was particularly motivated to use the online discussion forum on the Internet. This lack of motivation may have been related

in part to the fact that use of the online forum was made optional because two participants had no access to the Internet.

From a facilitator's point of view the main problem I found during the pilot was that most participants waited until they had finished the module before submitting work for feedback. Even though the module contained specific exercises for gaining facilitator feedback, most of these exercises were not submitted because participants "forgot" or "didn't realise" or "didn't get round to it".

When I was writing the module I tried to avoid a situation where a lot of material might be covered at a superficial level, where participants might learn a little about a lot rather than anything in depth. I was also concerned that the provision of small chunks of information in sections with associated exercises and readings might suggest that when the exercises and readings were finished there was no need to learn further. Such exercises have an obvious end from which it is possible to infer a 'you can stop now' signal. Despite my concerns the pilot group felt that they had been working at depth and were keen to follow up on the work they had done.

One of the academics who is presently completing the module for the ITT has suggested that the provision of more divergent exercises would be useful for more experienced teachers. Exercises such as complex case studies or lengthier explorations of problems should reveal pathways for further exploration of the topic after module completion. I am considering this provision in the next draft of the module.

Effective RBL

If we are to ensure that RBL does not become a set of simplistic, take away, pre-packaged training programs then RBL may be much more time consuming for the lecturer than conventional teaching ever was. Designing modules requires hours of work and redesign is necessary until it is as close to 'right' as possible. Providing written feedback to participants is ongoing and time consuming.

The first ITT module has provided a highly effective learning experience for a number of tutors and lecturers. From my work in RBL so far it seems that if packages

are thoughtfully designed and implemented on sound teaching and learning principles, RBL may have a useful place in the educational environment of the future.

Below I have listed some of my concerns in developing and implementing the ITT module and some ideas for overcoming them.

Writing and Using Modules - Concerns and Ideas

CONCERN	IDEAS
<p>The lack of opportunities for interaction with other participants and development of collegiality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up an online forum (through CEDIR) and an email group (through ITS). • Monitor and encourage people to use these. • Ensure at least some face to face discussion of major issues.
<p>The lack of personal interaction between participants and facilitator</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain email and phone contact. • Monitor and comment on the online forum. • Ensure at least some face to face discussion of major issues. • Treat your written feedback as a teaching and learning dialogue.
<p>The need to make the material relevant to all students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write open questions. • Have participants link their learning to what they already know and have experienced. • Provide opportunity to complete at least one 'divergent' exercise, eg explore a case study or problem in depth. • Where possible provide a project-based exercise such that participants choose their own topic for exploration. • Consider providing optional pathways through the materials where possible.
<p>The need to keep participants on task</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate individual time frames for completion of sections of the module. Write this as an 'agreement' and keep records. • Assess in sections rather than at the end. • Provide regular written feedback on short exercises to support their progress through the module.

<p>The need for realistic and valid assessment of learning outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use criterion referenced assessment linked to learning objectives. • Include self assessment as one of the assessment components.
<p>Non-use of the online discussion medium</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure participants have computer access and required skills and make participation a requirement. • Get the online discussion group started with a controversial statement or question. • Write reminders to use the online discussion at relevant places in the handbook. • Suggest that participants place certain items from their work on the forum. • Encourage one or two participants to start a debate.
<p>Packaged instructional material may appear didactic and patronising</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to the reader that pre-written, self instruction modules cannot be tailored to each individual so there will be information they are already familiar with. • Ask them to reflect on and critique familiar material. • Use a conversational writing style.
<p>The lack of time available for provision of written feedback</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set aside a specific time during the week to write responses.

Useful Materials

Kember, D. (1991) *Writing Study Guides*. UK: Technical and Educational Services.

Race, P. (1992) *53 Interesting Ways to Write Open Learning Materials*. UK: Technical and Educational Services.

References

Marton, F. & Säljö, R. (1976) On Qualitative Differences in Learning: 1 - Outcomes and Processes in *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 46: 4-11.

Report to NCODE 11 by the RBL Working Party (1996) *Quality Guidelines for Resource Based Learning*.

RESEARCH GROUP IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The research group in teaching and learning has been developing its focus over the last two years in terms of the implementation and evaluation of innovations in teaching and learning at the University of Wollongong. With this mantle, it has provided a home for grantees of National Teaching Development funds (previously referred to as CAUT grants, now CUTSD grants) and recipients of Educational Strategies Development Funds. Staff members thinking of CUTSD grants or working on existing projects are strongly encouraged to participate in the group meetings and activities. Contact with the group would also facilitate the dissemination of information on their projects. This can be achieved through two means: an infrastructure for providing presentations and support for producing articles in Overview. (Two of the main functions of the research group is to solicit articles for Overview and to provide editorial support).

This year, members have been getting together to work on a number of innovations across campus. Representatives of the Comprehensive Literacies Project working party attend meetings and discuss major issues. These have included whether literacies should be met through compulsory subjects or integrated into the curriculum, and where information literacies fit into the list of the attributes of the Wollongong graduate. As part of the Comprehensive Literacies project, sub-groups have been working on a library based component and a component involving the Nursing curriculum respectively.

Another innovation currently under consideration is the Communications Project. This has been formed through a group of academics who teach communication skills in a range of disciplines, including Law, Management, Health and Engineering. This project is still in its infancy, with academics sharing subject outlines and examining ways in which communication skills (with an initial focus on verbal communication skills) can be co-operatively taught across campus.

The first stage involves an examination of teaching materials and how they might be shared with a view to the integration of flexible delivery in the curriculum. In the long term, a central resource bank may be developed so that all academics could have access to the teaching of communication skills relevant to their subjects (for example, skills in giving verbal presentations).

Other members of the group are working in particular areas (for example Richard Caladine - A Model of Learning and Teaching Activities) and meetings provide a venue for the tabling and discussion of ideas, concepts, hypotheses and reports. The group meets in Meeting room 2, building 20 at the following times.

DAY	DATE	TIME
Tuesday	25 Feb	9:30am
Tuesday	1 April	9:30am
Thursday	8 May	2pm
Tuesday	10 June	9:30am
Thursday	7 August	2:00pm
Tuesday	23 September	9:30am
Tuesday	28 October	9:30am
Thursday	20 November	9:30am

Linda Tapsell, Coordinator