Designing and Facilitating a Constructivist Online Module: Reflections and Lessons Learnt

VISWANATHAN, Ganthimathi

Formerly from Centre of Excellence for Learning and Teaching, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 639798

Corresponding Author’s E-mail: ganthi@rocketmail.com

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Extended Abstract

Educational institutions in Singapore regularly stage e-Learning day or week drills to test and ensure business continuity in the event of a disruption to classroom teaching and learning. This practice was introduced after the SARS pandemic outbreak in 2003 which resulted in the closure of local educational institutions (MOE, 2003). Beyond the use of technology to ensure learning continuity, institutions also take this opportunity to familiarise staff and students with the IT tools available. This is in line with recognition on the institution’s part of the pervasive use of technology in today’s context and its affordances to create more effective and engaging learning experiences (NTU, 2012). The knowledge and skills required to design and facilitate learning online have become a necessity rather than a choice for today’s educators.

This paper aims to share the author’s reflections of designing and facilitating three runs of an online module “Online Instructional Design” (OID) (Aug 2012—Dec 2013). The module was offered as part of a compulsory “University Teaching for Teaching Assistants” course aimed to prepare postgraduate students for their roles as Teaching Assistants (TAs) at an institution of higher learning in Singapore. To ensure the TAs are confident and well prepared to facilitate learning, the university offers a compulsory one-semester (8 modules) course to all full-time students enrolled in their PhD programmes.

One of the aims of introducing this online module was to provide students an opportunity to experience and reflect on teaching and learning online, as well as to prepare them for their roles as TAs at the university. The students were given a choice to select the OID module or another 3-hour face-to-face module related to technology-enabled learning. For each run, more than half the cohort (150-230 students) selected the online option (from a cohort size of 240-400). The module was offered asynchronously over a 2-week period adopting an e-tivities methodology (Salmon, 2011) taking into consideration the three components of the Community of Inquiry design framework (Social Presence, Cognitive Presence and Teaching Presence) to create a “collaborative constructivist learning experience” (Garrison, 2011). Students were expected to complete a series

of tasks during the two-week period (to fulfil compulsory attendance requirements) and to submit a one-page development plan (for the final Pass/Fail module grade). The online tools used for this course were the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS) for one run and the Blackboard discussion forums for two runs.

The online module was designed and facilitated based on my belief that learning is as much a social activity as it is a self-directed one. Interactions with others and self-reflection are crucial for deep learning. I personally felt that the more prevalent xMOOC approach of content delivery and quizzes to test the “learning” was the online equivalent of the “sage on the stage” large lecture model.

The reflections in this paper are based on analysis of student feedback surveys, university-administered student feedback on teaching surveys, discussion forum posts, email and verbal communications and the facilitator’s experiences (including feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed) of designing and facilitating the three runs of this module.

The discussions in the paper include issues, considerations and possible strategies when facilitating graded online courses for large multidisciplinary cohorts with varied English language proficiencies.

References


