
DIGITAL LITERACY AND NEW TEACHING SKILLS FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS GOING ONLINE

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A big challenge for a small institution

What are the challenges and solutions as a small university department which focuses primarily on lifelong learning meets some of the central requirements of the Bologna process [1]?

In the autumn of 2003, all higher education in Norway was subject to a thorough reform of higher education, a reform that implements many aspects of the Bologna process [2]. Among the most important issues of this reform were the twin objectives of student focused teaching [3] and formative assessment. In other words, the reform wanted the learning of the student, not the teaching of the teacher to be the primary focus. And this learning was to be facilitated by formative assessment – feedback on important learning objectives throughout the course.

A Quantum Leap

These new priorities required a focused effort by the professors and the administrative staff in order to bring about quite a few major changes in a relatively short time. The subject of this presentation will be the practical consequences of including formative assessment into the teaching. This required something of a quantum leap: From only one assessment at the end of each course, each student was now to given formative assessment throughout the entire course.

So, in a course with 100 students, was the teacher to invite each student into his office for a conversation? This was obviously not the solution. Online support and dialogue was a natural choice to provide the formative assessment.

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo has a department for lifelong learning. At the eve of this huge reform, the department had about 200 students, five part-time teachers and an administrative staff of one. This department was the only part of the faculty that had any previous experience with online education. This experience told them that creation online support and dialogue for all students was a tremendous challenge.

So they initiated a project a year before the implementation of the reform to try out on a small scale what this would eventually mean for the faculty as a whole. A Master program in professional ethics for nurses and social workers was planned. This adult education Master was to be flexible in structure with the opportunity for part time or distance learning facilitated by online support. An adviser with the necessary theological, pedagogical and technical competence was hired. This person would coordinate this work.

New Tricks for Old Dogs

The aim was to use ICTs in the teaching and evaluation processes in such a way that the technology did not eclipse the learning objectives. This approach was intended to secure a genuine dialogue between teachers and students so that the ICT resources became serviceable and pedagogical tools.

As visions go, this is a positive, precise, and practical one. But long before the first course of this new Master degree ever started, the team was aware of a set of potential problems:

- The step from one weekly lecture to continuous teacher-student dialogue is a big one.
- There are significant pedagogical differences between teaching in a regular classroom and an online learning environment [4].
- Online teaching requires digital literacy from teachers as well as students.
- Online teaching is often time consuming [5].
- The professors are already pressed for time.

And then, of course, there is the old proverb that says: “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. In this case we had no choice. The professors teaching the new flexible master degree – and eventually all of our professors – had to go through this transition.

Instructional Webspaces Designer

We were aware that universities offering online courses usually have designated instructional webspaces designers. This is, of course, an ideal solution, but one that was not available to us. The resources were simply not sufficient.

The adviser that was hired as a coordinator for the project had the right qualifications. However, she had too many other assignments to be able to do the job.

Workshops were not the answer

Instead, workshops were arranged for the professors, not only those who would be teaching the new flexible Master degree, but all of the professors and tutors of the faculty. They would all eventually be required to give online support for their courses, so they were invited to learn how to use the LMS (learning management system) and to introduce them to the basic principles of teaching online.

However, as the reform of higher education was drawing closer, there was a wide array of seminars, workshops, and colloquiums on offer and many felt they simply did not have the time for another one.

As an alternative to the workshops each professor or tutor was offered a couple of one-on-one sessions to get to know the LMS and to get pedagogical advice for teaching online. But it was soon obvious that this would not be sufficient.

Many of the teachers lacked the sufficient computer skills to navigate the LMS. Some were confused by all the implications of the reform and only a couple seemed to be able to bring their teaching online after the one-on-one sessions.

Online Toolbox for E-learning

So how could we proceed in order to enable our teachers to fulfil the demands of the reform and ensure student focused learning and formative assessment through online support? A decision was made to move on along two lines:

- The continuous implementation of short one-on-one sessions when needed.
- The development of an online toolbox for e-learning.

The toolbox was designed as a web portal. It was kept simple so that it would not demand a high degree of digital literacy. Rather, it was meant to be a place where digital literacy could be

acquired. The number of elements of the portal was kept relatively low so that it would not be overwhelming. Each part of the portal was designed to be as precise as possible and always practical-pedagogical in orientation.

The elements of the online toolbox were:

- Reasons for e-learning. A short explanation of the benefit of e-learning and how it facilitates the goals of the reform.
- Technical tools for teaching online: audio, video, conferencing, forum discussions, chats, and slide shows.
- Pedagogical tools for teaching online: reviews of articles, books, movies and concerts, student critique, teacher critique, tests, tutorials, group work, brain storming or case based discussions.
- Information on how to write texts for online use.
- Information on online case based teaching: How to use texts, art and photos to encourage students to engage in scholarly discussions.
- LMS tips and hints.
- Reviews of books on e-learning.
- A teach yourself to teach online section, including a short pdf introduction to teaching online.
- Online discussions on some of the pitfalls of online communication and how to avoid them.

The online toolbox for e-learning was launched in time for the introduction of the reform in the autumn of 2003. It was the result of a small project in a tiny department but it soon became a resource for all of the teachers at the Faculty of Theology.

One year later

One year later University of Oslo is still working on implementing the reform. Only two out of eight faculties have designated people on a faculty level to facilitate e-learning.

Even though e-learning is a priority and is receiving special funding from the University administration, no instructional webspace designers have been employed. The task of adapting teaching material for online use is left to the professors or – in some cases – to teaching assistants.

As a result, the number of courses that have online support is still relatively low and so an important objective of the reform remains to be fulfilled.

The Faculty of Theology is one of the university units that have had extensive use of online support for courses. The strategy of short one-on-one support sessions combined with a suite of help tools in the online toolbox seems to enable the professors to acquire the digital literacy and the new teaching skills needed for teaching online.

A New Portal for Online Pedagogy

Looking for ways to facilitate e-learning with the limited resources available, the university administration made some funds available for projects that would try out new solutions. In the

Department for lifelong Learning at the Faculty of Theology the small team behind the online toolbox for e-learning was asked to design a larger set of tools: a portal for online pedagogy. This time the finished tools were to be made available for the whole university. The project period was from June 2004 to February 2005.

The new portal would include improved versions of the tools already available in the online toolbox for e-learning. In addition, it was expanded with the following resources:

- A digital cookbook for LMS. A short and simple manual in pdf format to be used as an introduction or to refer to when in doubt.
- LMS course pages with general resources so that teachers can cut and paste when preparing their own courses.
- Advanced LMS tips and tricks.
- A short introduction to using online discussion forums.
- Practical tips for using forums in teaching.
- How to search the net for material suitable for teaching.
- Link bank of quality tested scholarly web links.

The portal was launched in late February 2005 [6] and at the time of writing it is too early to say if the new portal will be as beneficial to the University as the online toolbox was to the Faculty of Theology.

Solutions

E-learning and online support for teaching is a vogue in Norway right now, as it is in many other European countries. Norway is well equipped for this kind of teaching, as we have one of the world's highest ratios of computers per inhabitant and of Internet access [7]. So the infrastructure for e-learning is present.

There is much to be gained from well planned and professionally executed e-learning and from online support for classroom education. But if the teachers are not trained to teach online or do not receive the support they need, e-learning becomes a stumbling block. It will be too time consuming for the teachers and if the job of adjusting the teaching material for use online is not properly done, the experience will be confusing for the students.

In order to take advantage of the benefits of e-learning, it is important that technical and pedagogical support is available. At last year's EDEN Conference, Corrine Bossé from Athabasca University in Canada described their system of instructional design teams with technicians, educationalists and web designers who work together [8].

A solution like this is optimal, but it is not an option everywhere. However, e-learning without some degree of technical and pedagogical support is a waste of time and money. It is possible that for highly motivated teachers, a system with online help for the novice and the adept alike, and with some degree of personal support, might be a way to go.

References

1. http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Higher_education/Activities/Bologna_Process/Bologna_Declaration.asp
2. Many of the changes effected by the reform are in accordance with the Bologna process. Important

aspects include the introduction of a new degree structure (bachelor, master, Ph.D.), the implementation of the ECTS-model (European Credit Transfer System), the establishment of NOKUT, The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, and better quality systems for the.

3. CORNFORD, JAMES AND POLLOCK, NEIL (2003) *Putting the University Online*, pp 38-51.

4. SALMON, GILLY (2000) *E-moderating*

STEPHENSON, JOHN (ED.) (2001) *Teaching and Learning Online*, pp 67-127

5. MASON, ROBIN (2003) "Successful Online Learning Conferences" in Per Arneberg (ed): *L ring i dialog p  nettet*.

6. For those of you with an understanding of Nordic languages, you can see the portal here:
<http://www.tf.uio.no/nettlaering/ansatte.html>

7. In 2003 about 75% of families with children have Internet access (http://www.ssb.no/ikthus_en/)

8. *EDEN Annual Conference Proceedings* (2004)

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