

The e-Winter school: Helping students to better learning

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E-learning is relatively new to the United Arab Emirates, arriving as it did, in around 2002 for most college institutions. Nowadays, most tertiary institutions have allocated Information Communication Technology resources to provide alternatives to the previously used teacher-centered, "chalk and talk" approach to learning and teaching. This is particularly true within the tertiary sector in the UAE. In line with this, at Dubai Women's College we are developing the e-Winter School program, using a blended-learning model that caters to that community of students who needs extra support: the ones that don't quite 'fit' into the blueprint. This paper details some of the pedagogical underpinnings of the program, discusses how it is constructed and explores the relative merits of the way in which the community is taught. It also deals with some of the methods of instruction involved in such an undertaking and details actual results achieved by the students. The contents of this paper may be of interest to those faculty members, designers and developers who need to examine some examples of emerging practice that attempt to combine on-line learning with face-to-face, classroom tuition. The paper represents a work in progress and will explore how, when we combine something which is called the "LOAF" approach, with on-line learning, we have a model that is, judging by the lack of evidence to the contrary, quite unique to this part of the world.

Keywords: English language development; UAE; blended learning; learning support; student self-management

Introduction

This paper focuses on an approach to learning used with students of Dubai Women's College in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE itself is a small country of approximately 4 million inhabitants, situated at the toe of the Arabian Peninsula and is bounded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman. Driven by oil and gas discoveries, the UAE's vibrant economies have experienced unprecedented economic growth in the last 10 years. Accordingly, the country needs graduates who are ready for the workplace and who have a high level of knowledge and confidence in the use of technology to help them in their lifelong learning. To this end, many tertiary education institutions in the UAE are preparing students for a rapidly changing information and technology driven world. Described as one of the most wired countries on earth (Walters and Quinn 2003), the UAE has come into the globalised world over the last 30 years and is now becoming a modern, independent country.

The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT)

In the UAE, the HCT, of which Dubai Women's College is a part, are increasingly using online learning or e-learning as it is more commonly called, as part of the curriculum. All subjects are studied and assessed in English and use of laptops is actively encouraged in order to foster familiarisation with technology. All of its 13 colleges have laptop-connectivity and both the faculty and students have had to adopt new practices in order to take advantage of this development. As such, this paper will focus on how I and my students have adapted to this and on a learning approach I have termed 'L.O.A.F.' Together with this I will comment on an area of e-learning termed, 'blended learning', variously used to describe, "arrangements in which "conventional", offline, non-electronic based instruction happens to include online tutoring or mentoring services (Heinze and Procter)."

Emerging learning practices in blended learning

Up to the present day, students in tertiary institutions in the UAE have normally undertaken all their previous education in Arabic, communicating in English as a second language and have varying levels of English proficiency. Students have mostly attended government funded schools that reflect a traditional teaching and learning approach of teacher-centric, rote-learning and memorisations with very limited

formats for learning resources (Mynard 2003). In this small Gulf country it is important to note that only a fraction of the mothers and fathers of today's students graduated from high school. As late as 1970, literacy rates in the UAE hovered just above 20 % (Walters and Quinn 2003) but are now closer to 76% (ameinfo.com), illustrating to some degree the advances in educating the citizens of the U.A.E. have been made. Major education reform over the last five years has called for more use of Integrated Communication Technology in secondary schools but this is occurring only in pockets and more often only in private schools. These deficiencies in provision of rich educational experiences prior to entering the tertiary environment have a significant impact on the design of appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Birks, Hunt and Martin (2007) note that students' learning is generally more teacher-controlled and task-directed than it would be in a western university. They suggest that tasks and assignments need to be more prescriptive, and independent work be very explicit and task oriented to cope with the cultural differences in current learners from the UAE. The e-Winter School is informed by these findings and, largely as a result of this educational backdrop, follows a blended-learning model.

The concept of change

This 'School' or program presents a number of new challenges for many of the students and they have to adopt new and more efficient work-habits in order to satisfy the academic requirements of the program. Such measures include a more disciplined approach to deadlines and, more importantly, some acknowledgement of their weaknesses and a desire to "change the way they were doing things" as we say in class. This expression is, in fact, a regular mantra within the lessons, and is used to try and help them understand that change requires change and that, as is my belief, they have to actively do something different if they want to improve. I am referring in particular to their understanding of grammar and its application within written communication.

Self efficacy

As well as the concept of change, self efficacy is also something that is discussed in the program and is cited as an important measure of a student's ability to cope with the new environment of online or blended learning. Social cognitive learning theory informs and teaches us about the nature of our learners, self efficacy being described by Mungania and Reio (2005) as a reflection of what individuals believe they can do with the skills they possess. Beliefs about one's own self efficacy levels may contribute to the success with which a task is completed. This is particularly true of many of the demands made on the students from the work given within the program. Due to the more independent nature of many of the tasks, students have to begin to believe that they can sometimes complete the tasks without the direct help of a teacher, which is something, as mentioned earlier, that traditionally they are not used to doing.

The creation of the e-Winter school

As stated earlier, our blended learning program is called the e-Winter School and has been developed in response to a leaner need. More specifically, the learners in this case are those that have failed the "English Language" component of the Higher Diploma "Business/IT" program in Semester 1, and, for whom, the normal consequence would be the cessation of their studies and a resultant decline in their English language competencies. The semester-long program was commissioned by the Management Team of the college and was written and developed by Kevin Kempin (the author) and his colleague Douglas McPherson.

The program is designed to allow students to avail of extra support in language studies and to give them an option to continue their education in a program which focuses on their particular areas of weakness: grammar, writing and critical self-analysis. Should the students prove to be successful in the e-Winter School, then, they can re-join the main "Business/IT" program in the following semester: if not, they cannot and have limited options thereafter.

The main players in the program

The program uses a combination of teaching 'tools' in order to achieve a measure of success in the target areas previously mentioned. The main contributors to this are an approach that I have coined "L.O.A.F." (Little Often And Focussed); the laptops themselves; a concept of 'zero tolerance'; a 'Personalised Grammar Checklist' and participation in a Virtual International Experience (VIE).

These component parts will be explained in more detail farther on in the paper, but suffice it to say at present, that the students experience a new approach to their studies that hopes to influence positively the

way in which they work: the basic contention being that they will need to change their study habits in order to improve. The majority of these students has been making the same grammar mistakes for an extended period of time, often many years, and has not been encouraged to analyse why they have not progressed academically as others have. Given their academic background, their need for 'self-change' in terms of awareness and correction has seldom been recognised nor encouraged and the e-Winter School attempts to addresses this issue.

However, the change we are looking for must come gradually and, given the students' academic background, cannot be expected to happen without guidance. This has led to one potential paradox in that that the student is both autonomous and, to some extent, controlled at the same time. The students, because of the personal laptop ownership, are able to study autonomously but also operate in a tightly-controlled and teacher-regulated environment regarding writing and grammar-skills work. However, we believe that the autonomy allowed by the laptop relates more to the 'when' of the study and the control used as part of "L.O.A.F." more to the 'how', resulting in guided learning at the students' pace.

The e-Winter school and LOAF

As stated in the introduction, a key feature of the program is the LOAF approach, in which the premise is that less is more when it comes to managing change. For example, within a normal 250-300word essay we would habitually find a number of errors many of which, however, would actually be repeated error types. Experience with these students has shown us that these same error types could be found within a relatively short segment of text and, therefore, negate the need for relatively lengthy samples. Indeed, some students find it demoralising to be shown repeated errors throughout a longer paper and loose spirit or interest, believing that their writing is highly erroneous when, in fact, it may not be. The students seem to find that the change required is more manageable if it is presented through smaller amounts of text.

How LOAF works: Personalised grammar checklists, zero-tolerance and authentic communication

The LOAF concept is one of 'controlled change' involving, limited production of writing together with targeted grammar work.

Personalised grammar checklist

In order to achieve this concept, we develop a guide which is highly personalised and is based on errors and error types identified by the tutor. Initially, the teacher sits with the student and systematically identifies all the errors and error-types that are present within a given essay or writing exercise and enters them onto the guide. The errors are discussed with the student and acknowledged as such. This is a very important stage as many of the learners fail to recognise these items as errors principally because they have been making them for so long that they have become to believe they are correct. This belief is compounded by the fact that teachers in previous state schools have not corrected them, for a myriad of reasons, one being that many are non-native speakers themselves and maybe unaware or unconcerned by the errors. The evidence for this assertion is admittedly only anecdotal, but is perhaps lent weight by the number of students that recall the same experiences.

Throughout the semester, the PGC as it is called, is filled in this way and becomes a mechanism that allows them to effectively identify and acknowledge their errors. Every week the same procedure is followed and they see a pattern developing. Having understood that they have these patterns they can begin know what to look for and self-edit. One further step is the adoption of the 'Write:Stop:Check' method in which the student writes one sentence, stops and checks it against her PGC for repeated error types and makes the necessary corrections. If, when consulting with the teacher over a new essay, new errors occur, they are logged by the teacher onto the guide and become part of the process for the writing of the next essay: so the guide grows. In this way, it is hoped that students are able to break fossilised error patterns and take more control of their writing. They are also encouraged by the fact that, should an error cease to be made, they can delete it from the PGC and declare themselves 'free' of the error. This, they have found to be very motivating.

Zero tolerance

In order to under pin this process, the teacher uses what we call a 'zero-tolerance' system. In this system , once identified, the student is not 'allowed' to repeat an error that has already been made and logged onto the PGC; the principle here being one of 'tough love': If an error is repeated in the essay, the teacher immediately stops marking, asks the student to consult their PGC and come back when the mistake is corrected. The student then has to leave the consultation and wait her turn again, which, in a room of 23

students or more, could take a considerable amount of time. The hope is that she will not want to spend or waste time in this manner and will, therefore, be diligent when it comes to her self-editing process when the initial writing takes place. A rather blatant use of the ‘carrot and stick’ concept admittedly but, at this late stage in a student’s college career, such, arguably radical measures, may be deemed acceptable. One of the challenges with this method is managing the student’s frustration at being made to wait and having to do something which at first they believe to be ‘the teacher’s job’. This has to be weighed against the possible benefits of the student being forced to take more responsibility before coming to the teacher, and, in the process, engendering greater autonomy. In fact, we do not see this process as wasted time but rather as necessary time spent learning to undue fossilised errors. The PGC is updated weekly as each new writing is completed, creating a dynamic document which changes according to the student’s needs.

There is a temptation to suggest that the PGC could ‘travel’ with the student through each academic year and extend its use as a learning tool. However desirable this may be to the author and program teachers, we have no evidence of this happening and, indeed, suspect that it is an e-Winter School-bound document only. It would be unusual for the majority of this student body to identify a use for a learning tool outside of its immediate application - a challenge we face daily, especially as we teach using integrated projects.

Other features of the e-Winter school

Away from the LOAF approach the e-Winter School also utilises quizzes and assignments in order to allow practise in other skill areas such as, Reading and Listening together with work on Vocabulary and Spelling. All of these learning items have daily deadlines attributed to them which are not negotiable. Each day there are activities that cover all the major language skills and, as the course progresses, so do the number and complexity of the tasks the students undertake. The deadlines are designed to foster self-management skills and help specifically with time-management and the understanding of consequences: if a student misses a deadline the associated quiz or assignment simply closes and she loses some of the marks needed to pass the week. Although this deadline system may not sound noteworthy to many, in this learning culture the students have previously been used to very ‘flexible’ deadlines and have seldom felt the consequences of having missed a deadline. Further, if a student fails 4 weeks of the program, whether consecutively or not, she fails the course and is asked to withdraw. The rationale here is that that we are expecting a notion of partnership in this endeavour and, by failing what amounts to nearly 25% of the course, the student shows us that she is not engaging to a sufficient degree and, therefore, does not warrant further resource expenditure. There is an environment of ‘privilege’ attached to a place at college as the education is free to students and places are competitively sought after.

Virtual international exchange

As part of the program, but not as part of assessment, we endeavour to offer the students a chance to engage in ‘real’ communication with other, preferably native-English speakers in order that they practice their skills. It is, of course, always desirable that this happens within any language course and especially one in which the participants have few opportunities to communicate with native English speakers, living, as they do in this case, in an Arab speaking country. We also feel that we have a small enough group to make this manageable and that the students’ geographical location is interesting enough for others to want to engage.

Waikato Institute of Technology (WINTEC)

We exchange with “WINTEC”, an institute of learning in New Zealand for the simple reason that they fit the criteria: English-speaking and willing! All the students involved are following some form of Business Studies Program, and, therefore, in an attempt to find commonality, each week the participants have to focus written discussion around issues of business and the culture of business in their respective countries. This prompts a significant amount of debate and written material upon which we can, in theory, later focus for learning purposes. In practice, we do not analyse this corpus as, regrettably, to include it in the program requires better time-management than we have been able to achieve thus far. However, the students do begin to develop ‘virtual friendships’ with their respective ‘friends’ and add to their postings on the Discussion Board by contacting them using personal e-mail addresses.

In addition to the work done on written communication, we are also able to ‘bring to life’ the exchange by organising a ‘Video-conference’ with WINTEC. This has the twin benefits of furthering personal relationships and exposing DWC students to spoken English in a variety of accents, such is the ethnic diversity of students in New Zealand.

As we have not analysed the communication in terms of benefit- to-learning, we only have the anecdotal evidence to suggest that the students benefit from the exchange. They speak of ‘friendship’, ‘authenticity’

and 'interest' and the teachers on both 'sides' notice how keen they are to participate when the opportunity arises.

Conclusion

We are now at the end of this Winter School and 97% of those students that are finishing the course has passed all the weeks assigned. This means that, in this case, 28 students who would normally be lost to our college system have the opportunity to re-enroll in the Higher Diploma (HD) program and, potentially, come back as stronger language students as a consequence of the e-Winter School. It means equally that, unlike in former years (see 'Emerging Learning Practices...." chapter), these students have been able, to some degree, to adopt and adapt to a changing learning paradigm. In particular, they have been able to begin to break free from a teacher-dependent, Arabic only-based model and have begun to accept responsibility for their study in an 'e-environment' unknown to many of their predecessors.

We can only suggest that they are 'potentially' stronger as a result of the e-Winter School, as we have no research to prove that this is the case. However, from last year's cohort, only one of 32 students that re-enrolled in the HD program failed to pass the semester that they had previously failed. This does suggest that an intervention of some kind has made a difference and we believe that it is the approach that we take within the e-Winter School that has made the difference.

Note: Student evaluations of the course, grammar guides and the course itself will be available to view and discuss as part of the presentation.

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Please cite as: Kempin, K. (2007). The e-Winter school: Helping students to better learning. In *ICT: Providing choices for learners and learning. Proceedings asilite Singapore 2007*.
<https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2007.2561>

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