

Blended Learning – A ‘flipped’ approach in Sociology

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Learning activity:
Flipped classroom

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Context

Background overview

The Department of Sociology describes itself as a dynamic research focused unit. Its programme offerings encompass a wide spectrum of local and international issues such as poverty, development, globalization and inequality. The department prides itself on producing graduates who are capable of high-level theoretical and analytical processing skills.

The course under investigation is a third year political sociology module attracting a heterogeneous student cohort of about 100 students. There is one academic and seven student facilitators.

Topic

Professor Heinecken describes her module as dynamic and exciting. Due to the topic nature of her module, references are made to concepts such as ‘power, government and the state’, ‘governance and civil society’, ‘protests and social movements’ and ‘power beyond the rules’.

Learning and assessment activities

Educational approach

Having been a participant in the Centre for Learning Technologies’ blended learning short course, Professor Heinecken decided to make use of podcasting as a strategy to enhance her teaching and learning practices. Initially she made podcasts of all her lectures. She reasoned that students could utilize these podcasts for revision purposes or if they missed out on lectures. However, after consultation with the Centre for Learning Technologies, she was advised to adjust her pedagogy towards a form of blended learning known as a ‘flipped classroom’. This form of blended learning is described as the thoughtful fusion between face-to-face interactions and podcasting (McHaney, 2011).

Traditionally lectures are used for content dissemination. Ideally, provision should also be made for class discussions. Depending on the dynamism of the lecturer and time constraints, there may be instances where little emphasis is placed on the creation of deliberative spheres of engagement.

To circumvent this problem, lecturers, such as Professor Heinecken, are now implementing ‘flipped classroom’ pedagogies. In a ‘flipped classroom’

a lecturer produces short podcasts covering key concepts that would otherwise take up large portions of time in a lecture, leaving little time for student interaction. Students are required to watch these podcasts before coming to face-to-face sessions. Consequently students come to class better equipped to engage in discussion and apply concepts they have internalised through watching these podcasts. This pedagogy therefore allows for the development of high-level theoretical and analytical processing skills.

As with any course, there are concerns regarding class attendance. Initially this was a problem for Professor Heinecken as her podcasts were recordings of entire lectures. Consequently, students did not feel the need to attend lectures, as they could catch up with work at their own time. However, through effective implementation whereby students were granted access to the aforementioned short podcasts, class discussions were fostered that also resulted in an increase in class attendance. Many students embraced such a transformative approach to learning and subsequently student passivity changed to active engagement with the course content.

The challenge

According to Professor Heinecken, most of her students have embraced this ‘flipped’ based pedagogy. However, a few students found it difficult to adapt to this pedagogy. These students have indicated that they still prefer passive modes of delivery despite the creative changes actuated by the lecturer.

Learning environment

Due to course resources such as podcasts and articles, stored on SUNLearn, learning has not been confined to brick and mortar solutions. The learning management system facilitates the development of asynchronous learning environments supplemented by class discussions

The screenshot shows the SUNLearn interface. On the left is a 'NAVIGATION' menu with options: My home, Site home, SUNLearn, My profile, Current course, Sociologie / Sociology - 324, Participants, Badges, POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY 324 // POLITIEKE SOSIOLOGIE 324, and News forum. On the right is the 'News forum' section, which includes 'General news and announcements', an 'Add a new topic' button, a 'Discussion' section with a post by 'Herlys // Re-write list', and an 'Exam Consultation/Konsultasie' section.



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and SUNLearn chat forums. Students also learned collaboratively by engaging in tutorial groups.

Responses

Choice options	Not answered yet	TUESDAY //DINSDAG 09:00	TUESDAY // DINSDAG 10:00	TUESDAY// DINSDAG 11:00	WEDNESDAY // WOENSDAG 11:00
Number of participants	16	10	25	24	24
Users who chose this option					

Student experiences

Adopting a ‘flipped’ based approach may require a pedagogical shift. For years students were perhaps subjected to passive modes of course delivery. With ‘flipped’ based initiatives students are required to take responsibility for their own learning. Although many students have embraced this new style of teaching and learning, some remain hesitant towards its application. Additionally, students have pointed out that they no longer feel pressured when taking class notes. International students have also pointed out that the use of podcasts in this blended mode of delivery has assisted them in overcoming language barriers.

Conclusion

Careful research and consideration should be taken into account when introducing a new educational technology. Each context is invariably unique as Professor Heinecken discovered during her initial adoption and the problems that subsequently arose. Professor Heinecken will now be working closely with the Centre for Learning Technologies’ advisors to refine her current blended learning initiatives. Through this collaboration she will be provided with assistance in the use of tools such as CMAP tools and Camtasia studio to develop her course content and assessments towards a truly blended mode of delivery.

Bibliography

McHaney, R. 2011. *The new digital shoreline: How Web 2.0 and Millennials are revolutionizing higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

