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Workflow in practice: Supporting work-based learning in a blended learning environment

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Abstract
This case study looks at the practical outcomes of using 'Workflow' in a blended learning environment, examining its potential to enhance both the learning of the students and the perception of the students' learning by staff. Workflow was provided as a collaborative tool for students, during a live industry project at the Fashion Business School in London College of Fashion. This study explores the outcomes of their collaborative work and discusses the ways Workflow can enhance academics' perception of the student learning experience.

This case study will explore the use of 'Workflow', a modified version of 'Mahara', in the Fashion Business School at the London College of Fashion during a project which ran in the summer term of 2015. Workflow was chosen to be an online student collaborative 'netfolio' (Barbera, 2009), used in a blended context for an industry-based, cross-discipline, collaborative project with the John Lewis menswear fashion buying team. Having one online, secure, internal platform through which the students' work could be shared was seen as preferable to accepting a variety of web-based, public sharing applications with varying levels of access, visibility and privacy implications. The aim was to reveal 'student exchange' when undertaking teamwork and enhance their experience of what Elena Barbera describes as the 'profound' learning facilitated by collaboration (2009, p.343).

Workflow had a weekly set of upload pages with a defined set of academic team goals mapped to the scheme of work 'milestones', additionally there was set of discipline-specific areas for uploading student generated content. The students treated it as a formal online classroom area, leaving fractious conversations to their own private social media networks, those conversations being acknowledged in the students' reflections. This structure facilitates the 'two way systems approach' (Hamilton and Tee, 2013) across two domains involving students uploading online and staff feeding back in the classroom. This encouraged the students to regularly collaborate and understand that their work would be acknowledged in an open crit. This is a different way of working to more traditional blended or online e-portfolio teaching (Barbera, 2009) when all the feedback is given online, which can cause a significant increase in lecturer perception of workload (Gerbic, 2011, p.227).

The project was eight weeks long and involved three first year B.A. (Hons) cohorts across Fashion Marketing, Fashion Buying and Merchandising and Fashion Visual Merchandising courses; approximately 150 students across nine Workflow groups. The students had worked collaboratively before, but only within their disciplines. For this collaborative unit they had to negotiate with new team members outside their own familiar disciplines, making critical decisions to fulfill the project's outcomes. In the individual unit reflection many students described this negotiation as being complex and stressful. The cohorts were very diverse, which led to disparity in verbal communication and confidence. There were peer-to-peer complaints around the differing levels of work-rate and contribution levels between disciplines. Differences in academic expectation across the cohorts and discipline 'overlap' were also observed. This led to conflict over defining responsibility as to whom would make the final decisions over areas of common knowledge. Using a netfolio for this type of project allowed the staff deeper insights into student learning through the life of the project, via close observation of what was occurring within the teams.

The students are 'millennials' and they have smartphones, along with social media accounts that have followed them from school. It would have been naive of the teaching team to suggest that Workflow was going to be a replacement for these other tools for peer communication. Immediate use was made of 'WhatsApp' and 'Facebook' for example. In student reflections Workflow's user interface was mentioned little – it seemed to be just another 'thing to do' and it appeared to be neutral. The contributions were mainly concerned with gathering and display, as opposed to engaging in ideas and decision-making online. In this context this should not be unexpected, as this activity would be undertaken in face-to-face meetings. Posting on these pages could be interpreted as using the site as more of a noticeboard, rather than a space for critical peer feedback. Where the challenges did occur was in the weekly presentations to academics, one of whom was particularly good at creating an environment where the students would have to justify and explain their decisions, thereby enhancing their learning. On some of the sites the feedback was summarised by the students and shared with action points.

Regarding the 'quiet voice', it was a good platform for submission in a reflective manner instead of during the heat of a face-to-face meeting. These students noted in their reflections how fast conflict could develop with instant messaging. Perception of engagement can be biased by the majority of work coming from relatively few students 'over-contributing'. Just as one person within a group can dominate through speech, on Workflow one member can dilute the work of others. We can make the assumption that this could have been a student who did not speak up during a meeting and was unsure of themselves, it could equally have been the 'loud voice' on 'all channels' – face-to-face contact would confirm that either way. Further consideration could be given to whether Workflow areas might specify that only original content should be posted, thereby reducing the situation where students bombard each other with competitive 'retrieved' information.

The use of Workflow was assumed to be sensitive to the encouragement of staff, however there was no clear correlation between 'positive' and 'negative' staff support in the use of Workflow. Having read through the reflective blogs and looked at the sites, usage was more dependent on the composition of the group and their attitude to teamwork. We set up Workflow as part of the learning environment, as opposed to an area where they exclusively acquire knowledge and discourse, so Workflow in this context was only a proportion of the learning experience, unlike a e-portfolio or net-portfolio used exclusively for online delivery (Gerbic, 2011). Valid work may have occurred elsewhere.

In summary, Workflow has potential to enhance the perception and skills of academics and students in teaching the dynamics of teamwork and collaboration. As acknowledged by Gerbic (2011), there is less literature on the changing effect of technology from the teacher's perspective, some of whom perceive e-learning as threatening to their identities (2011, p.229). The student learning can be profound, or it can be less so, as determined by the individual students participation (O'Keeffe and Donnelly, 2013, p.1). Workflow offers potential reflective insights for staff and students alike.

References

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Biography

Tim Williams graduated from the MA in Fashion Design at CSM in 1982, then worked as a designer for, amongst others, Hardy Amies, Chelsea Girl, Conran Design Group, Debenhams and Agent Provocateur. At present he is Course Leader of BA (Hons) Fashion Design & Marketing, BA (Hons) Fashion Retail Management and Graduate Diploma Fashion Management at London College of Fashion.