

A reflection upon the value of embracing the principles of learning communities as part of a response to pressure to reduce staff student ratios in post-1992 Higher Education Institutions whilst maintaining the quality of student work-based learning

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Abstract

This work reflects upon the value of embracing learning communities as part of a response to pressure to reduce staff student ratios in post-1992 Higher Education Institutions whilst maintaining the quality of the student learning experience during final year projects and MSc dissertations. It concludes that well engineered, implemented and managed communities can indeed enhance the student learning experience with reduced academic resource and also brings major additional benefits for the students and the institution.

Introduction

The author is employed in the School of Computing in a post 1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI), ranked 113th in the Complete University Guide (Complete University Guide, 2013) in April 2013 that has a staff-student ratio (SSR) of 20.3.

Although published work does not necessarily always support the anecdotal, local impression that SSRs have degraded significantly since the institution's time as a polytechnic and especially so during the previous Labour Government's tenure during which it was intended that one in three of all young people would benefit from having attended H E by the end of the twentieth century (Lawton, 1992)

This (albeit perceived) pressure to 'service' more students per member of staff has also resulted in pressure on staff to supervise more undergraduate student final year computing projects and more MSc computing dissertations per member of staff (Johnes, 2006). The traditional approach to project\dissertation supervision is for the supervisor to meet with an individual student on a regular (usually weekly) basis for 20 or 30 minutes, repeating much common content of the supervisory meeting with other individual students. Supervising more and more students, using this model, would lead

inevitably to spending more and more time supervising students which would leave less and less time to spend on other duties.

A different supervisory model

Some years ago the author, realising that repeating common elements of a meeting several times a week with different project\dissertation students was not only tedious but unnecessary, created a 'group meeting' once per week to which all supervised project students were 'invited' (expected to attend), cake was provided and the following approach was adopted:

- a list of topics to be discussed each week was published
- generic documents pertaining to different aspects of the final year project were published on line
- all students were made aware that the meeting was to last a maximum of one hour, during which any project\dissertation issue(s) that they had personally were to be documented, aired and discussed
- all issues to be raised for discussion by each student were documented in advance (usually in a notebook reserved for this purpose only) and resolutions noted. Any issues unresolved in the meeting were to be resolved by the student (either independently, working with other students or working with the\ tutor) in a specified timescale
- a task breakdown and project plan for the entire 30 week project was created by each student for their own project very early in the process and updated frequently as more experience of the tasks was gained

To the author's surprise and delight, the one hour per week that it took for the meeting appeared more than adequate for the vast majority of the students (once they had come to know (and trust) each other). They formed themselves into a self-supporting group (or grouplets) that communicated independently of the author, often resolving issues and sharing published sources of common interest. Not only that, but there was a team spirit engendered that led to joint nights out and general enjoyment.

Sadly, no quantitative analysis of student attainment of this group of students compared to other, previous, 'non-group' students to ascertain whether the academic attainment of the group cohort was different to previous, non-group cohorts of project students.

Subsequent reading has identified that the author had unwittingly created a 'learning community' (Ludwig-Hardmann, 2003) in which "individuals from multiple perspectives willingly collaborate as a larger collective whole toward a shared goal or vision". The anecdotally observed benefits of the learning community arise not only for students and the tutor\author but also for the institution as described by Tinto (Tinto, 1993) and have evolved from similar benefits experienced in professional 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998 and Barab and Duffy (2000) cited in Jonassen and Duffy (1992)).

Extending the supervisory model

The author has used the experience gained from the unintentional creation of a successful learning community with a group of (relatively) homogeneous, 'traditional', full-time, computing learners and sought to transfer the benefits to more disparate groups of work-based and distance learners; a group of learners of increasing importance to the institution (Staffordshire University, 2013). These learners study one individualised university module at level 4, 5, 6 and 7 at a time, whilst working in organisations that have Work Based Learning partnerships with the Institution. Each student is allocated a nominated member of the institution's academic staff as 'supervisor' for each of the modules that they study.

The empirical experience gained from supervising 'traditional' students as a learning community led the author to adopt the following approach for WBL students:

- Ensuing that a preliminary face-to-face meeting with the student takes place in which the following are discussed\defined:
 - o The nature of WBL learning (and the independence of the learner) and the learners relationship with the academic supervisor
 - o Identification of other learners in the student's organisation that are on similar learning journeys and check that communication is possible between them
 - o Communication with supervisor (preferred means, frequency, contact details etc)
 - o Timescales and deliverables of module (milestones, definition of deliverables)
 - o Academic expectations of institution
 - o Defining the assessment process
- Ensuring that relevant, explanatory information is readily available to the learner in a suitable form
- Responding rapidly to contact from the learner by whatever method(s) suit(s) them best (as long as this also suits the tutor)

Initial (as yet formally unmeasured and unpublished) experience is that this approach is effective for both learner and tutor and is not prohibitively onerous in creating a positive and successful learning experience.

Conclusion

The author's experience of facilitating Learning Communities in order to supervise increasing numbers of 'traditional' students, which is simply expected by their employing institution, has generated approaches that are now being applied with Work Based Learning students.

Initial, informal feedback from students about their learning experience is positive.

The academic success of the application of these approaches is yet to be measured formally and quantitatively.

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