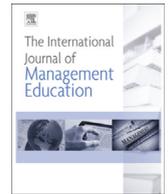


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Facilitating student engagement and collaboration in a large postgraduate course using wiki-based activities



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of wiki-based activities on student participation and collaborative learning in a large postgraduate international management course. The wiki was used in this study as a facilitator for engagement and collaboration rather than a means of online discussions. Based on both qualitative and quantitative data, we find strong evidence that the use of the wiki facilitated student engagement and collaboration, both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, student learning had significantly improved as a result of the enhanced learning environment.

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1. Introduction

Student engagement is a key factor for learning and personal development. The idea is simple: the more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. Students can be engaged at different levels: with the teacher, faculty or University, with other students, and with their own learning. In this paper, we are interested in the impact of a new technology on student engagement with others (collaboration) and with their own learning (active learning). E-learning tools are now embedded in many courses and programmes, bringing new benefits and challenges to teaching. Our analysis is based on a case study as we investigate the introduction of wiki-based teaching and learning activities in a large postgraduate international management course. A wiki is a web communication and collaboration tool that can be used to engage students within a collaborative environment (Parker & Chao, 2007). Our approach differs from previous empirical studies as the wiki was used here as a facilitator for student engagement and collaboration rather than a means of online discussions. The wiki was not used for direct online discussions but was rather used for submitting and reviewing group work (Mader, 2006). Finally, the case study methodology used in this paper allowed us to triangulate our findings, ensuring the validity of our research. The data collected includes qualitative feedback from all participants (students, tutor and lecturer), wiki activity logs of individual students (number of wiki pages viewed and/or edited), as well as quantitative answers from multiple choice questions.

In the next section, we present the literature around wikis, collaborative learning and active learning. Section 3 develops the research questions, methodologies and methods used in this study. In Section 4, we present our findings about the impact of wiki-based activities on student engagement and collaboration. Section 5 further discusses our results and outlines interesting unintended outcomes. Section 6 concludes.

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2. Literature review

A large body of literature emphasizes the role of learning environment factors in enhancing student learning (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Schelfhout, Dochy, Janssens, Struyven, & Gielen, 2006). In this study we are interested in two factors corresponding to student engagement with others (peer discussion or collaboration) and with their own learning (active environment). Empirical evidence shows that peer learning allows for more interactivity, motivation and engagement from students (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992; Goldschmid & Goldschmid, 1976; Tang, 1998; Topping, 1996). The potential of collaborative learning groups has been largely supported by the pedagogic literature (Dillenbourg, 1999; Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, & O'Malley, 1995), drawing on various theories of learning such as knowledge creation, knowledge building, group cognition and activity theory. Similarly, there is evidence that active learning, student-centered approaches to teaching work, and work better than more passive approaches (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Jie, 2009; Michael, 2006).

Social software applications, i.e., technologies that support people in communicating, interacting, and collaborating in large communities, provide new opportunities for knowledge building and collaborative learning (Collins & Halverson, 2010; Dohn, 2009; Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010). Such pedagogical opportunities have been largely emphasized in the context of wikis (Cress & Kimmerle, 2008; Wheeler, 2009). Wikis provide new and simple ways for a web-based collaboration and authoring and have been used as e-learning environments in schools and higher education (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005; Leuf & Cunningham, 2001; Richardson, 2008). They allow the implementation of a truly blended learning process, i.e., a “feedback-driven process” (Cubric, 2007b).

Previous evidence suggests that e-learning approaches are particularly well suited for teaching and learning in the management education area (Allan, 2007; Arbaugh & Duray, 2002; Brower, 2003; Burrige & Öztel, 2008; Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005). Indeed e-learning tools are reported to improve communication skills which are recognized to be an important employability factor in management. Students themselves perceive the benefits of e-learning in social science education (Marsh, Pountney, & Prigg, 2008). For instance, students in international management courses recognize online learning as a platform to share and exchange their academic and life experiences (Pimpa, 2011).

Cress and Kimmerle (2008) develop a theoretical framework for collaborative knowledge building with wikis: the co-evolution model. According to this model, one person's individual knowledge can serve as a resource for the learning of others. Wikis facilitate student learning by engaging them in an asynchronous way (Elgort, Toland, & Smith, 2008), allowing for future review (Brack & Van Damme, 2010), overcoming the challenges of large class sizes and limited face-to-face time (Brack & Van Damme, 2010), and providing flexibility for students with conflicting timetables and other commitments (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002; Carr, 2012; Marks et al., 2005). A recent study shows that wikis are a useful tool to facilitate collaborative blended learning among postgraduate students (Hulbert-Williams, 2010).

There are nonetheless several challenges with designing wiki-based teaching and learning activities that need to be taken into consideration. For instance, some students do not feel comfortable working in groups or feel confused about what is required of them (Hulbert-Williams, 2010; Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008).

3. Research question and methodology

3.1. Research question and intended outcomes

The main research question of this study is: “How can the use of new technologies such as wikis facilitate student engagement and collaboration in a large postgraduate course?” This research question can be investigated through both direct and indirect intended outcomes. Firstly, the use of the wiki should have a direct impact on students, as it should facilitate their preparation for seminars, their participation during seminars and their collaboration out-of-class. Secondly, the use of the wiki should indirectly improve their learning environment (especially the active environment and peer discussion factors) and ultimately improve their learning of discipline-specific outcomes and transferable skills.

3.2. Case study methodology

In order to address these issues, our paper follows a case study approach (Yin, 2008). One main advantage of the case study methodology is that a complex case can be investigated in its natural context combining different research methods. This allows examining the case from various angles and ensuring the validity of the findings through triangulation.

The research participants were 76 postgraduate students from an international management module. Students came from three different Masters programmes: 18 in Economics & Finance (24%), 28 in International Management (37%), and 30 in Management (39%). More than half of the students were female and Asian. Between February and May 2012, students attended 11 weekly lectures and 10 weekly seminars (3 groups of 25–26 students). The assessment for this module was 20% in-class test and 80% final exam. The exam included an essay question and several exercises requiring calculations and/or discussion. The intended learning outcomes of this specific course were detailed in the unit template available to all students. For the purpose of this study, we also identified 5 generic graduate attributes (GGAs) relevant for the course. These skills, accredited by the Centre in Business Management Accountancy and Finance from the Higher Education Academy, are the following:

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