



Empowerment On-line Collaborations: Learning Diaries as a Sustainable Learning Tool

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Abstract

This paper will illustrate the outcomes on the use of learning diaries as a sustainable learning tool. Taking as a case study the research on student empowerment online collaborations projects carried out by Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Finland and Stenden University in Emmen, The Netherlands. The paper will compare the traditional assessment tools with learning diaries as a way of empowering students to be engaged and committed to their own learning process and learning outcomes.

Online collaborations among universities are cost-effective and allow universities to internationalise their curriculum easily. Once considering a virtual collaboration project the learning objectives are set based on the competences and learning outcomes considered adequate for students to achieve at the end of the collaboration. These steps are taken in mutual understanding among the institutions, and assessment forms to evaluate students are formulated, a course is designed and offered on the topics institutions consider necessary for students to be successful in the collaborations. However, what would happen if institutions empowered students to be in charge of their on-line collaboration, if they could formulate their own learning objectives and reflect on their own learning outcomes. What would happen if students could co-create and manage their own international online collaboration and reflect all in a learning diary aiming at a sustainable learning process.

Many students stated in their learning diaries that their learning objectives were to improve language and communication skills, intercultural and project management competences. However, not all understood the goals of a Learning Diary since they did not reflect on their own learning process and achievements but on the project itself. Many thought it was difficult to produce a self-reflection in a written way, therefore individual interviews were scheduled to gain more insight into the reflections in the learning diaries.

It was remarkable to see the commitment and engagement of students who understood that to be empowered to lead their own projects and to be engaged in their own learning process, was meant to learn in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: *Online collaborations, student empowerment, sustainable learning processes;*

1 Introduction

This paper is based on a cross boarded learning project with an objective of learning business and cross cultural communication for international settings via a semester project.

The universities involved were Stenden University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Finland. The student-lead project entailed a research on use of cross cultural aspects in business communication in the two countries; regarding external communication, internal communication and marketing strategies. This paper describes and discusses participant experiences. The project initiated cooperation on student level, and included blended and inquiry learning. The learning objectives were improving skills in business and intercultural communication as well as project communication and management. The students were managed by student project managers. Some workshops were given but most work was conducted in student teams. A team of lecturers supervised and coached the process.

Students had to manufacture surveys to gather the information on the mentioned topics from companies in both countries, and then discuss and analyse the information obtained in virtual meetings. The students were also responsible of finding suitable companies for the interviews. The project was rounded up by presenting the outcomes in Finland where students could work together for a week this time in the same setting.

Students were assessed on the Finnish side with a Language Portfolio including sample documents a learning diary on the project. Students on the Dutch side were assessed on a Learning Diary and a subsequent individual interview on the reflections of their diaries. The depth of their reflections and

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self-assessment in the diaries varied from student to student and it was directly interrelated to the level of understanding of critical thinking, self-reflection, and engagement in the project a student possessed.

2 Engagement and sustainability in assessment

The nature of assessment is known to affect students' approach to learning and research shows that students are more likely to adopt "surface" rather than 'deep' approaches to learning if regurgitation of knowledge is the main criterion being assessed Bloxham, S. & Boyd, P. (2007). However, assessment supports quality assurance and lifelong learning. There has always been a search of assessment methods that optimises students' engagement when learning since it is believed that the method(s) used have a significant impact, not only in the sustainability of what is learned but also in the future working life. In an ideal world the assessment forms to which students are exposed, will be varied supporting different purposes in the learning process.

2.1 Assessment Design

As stated before the two universities had two different approaches regarding assessment. Haaga-Helia felt that together with the Learning Diaries, students had to be assessed on their language skills through a Language Portfolio which would provide evidence of their achievements regarding the development of English, whereas Stenden did not feel the necessity of it since English skills are tested in the formal curriculum. Both universities, Stenden and Haaga-Helia, had in a previous edition of the project asked students to produce a Learning Diary in which students reflected on what they had learned through the project. Stenden students were given the freedom to give to their diary any layout they felt they needed as long as they reflected on their own learning outcomes, and Haaga-Helia students had a simple reflection form. The result was that many students could not identify what they had to reflect upon or how to do it. Many of the reflections lacked depth, self-assessment was in many cases non-existing. Then Haaga-Helia arranged reflection meetings in teams, which proved to be successful and helpful for Diary reflection.

In the latest project Stenden scheduled individual interviews on the content of the Learning diaries, which proved to be very useful since many of the students could not reflect in a written way what they could in a spoken reflection. When exposed to their reflections on their Diaries, it became clear that many had not formulated clear and personal learning objectives before the project started and therefore did not know which objectives they had achieved at the end of the project. Subsequently, they had the feeling that they had learned nothing or very little through the semester.

Furthermore, it was interesting to see the students' instant reflections on the project work at the end of the intensive week in Finland, and see the differences in their reflections in their learning diaries. Many students reflected on the positive experience of working across cultures. Also, they pointed out project-related topics and nearly all had gained insights into communication, cultural issues and team work. Students might formulate their ideas and expressions more freely and explicitly in an unofficial setting than in a rather official diary document that they know will be assessed. In the instant reflections the students wrote about the points learned, competences gained and how they planned to use them in the future.

The project managers thought that many students lacked enthusiasm but still many learned much and developed as leaders. The quality of work might not have been consistent across the teams. The companies could have been involved more in the process, and a connection between the companies and students across the countries was missing.

Traditional assessment methods do not normally allow students to exercise critical thinking but would rather be more mark-giving oriented, with little engagement and self-reflection expected from students in the final learning outcomes. Lecturers are expected to deliver the final assessment and therefore students take and accept a passive role in the assessment process. However, the basis of a Learning Diary is to take responsibility in what is learned and how sustainable it is learned. Students are expected to assess themselves and take an active role in the process of self- assessment and subsequently learn about their own learning process, and through engagement learn more sustainably.

2.2 Learning Diaries As a Sustainable Learning Tool



In this new edition of the project the instructors felt that the true value of a Learning Diary was not yet clear to students, and therefore provided a template of a Learning Diary which could serve as guideline to students on how to reflect on their learning progress, self-assessment, and self-reflection. The Haaga-Helia students used the previous form and a new one was created for the Stenden students.

The template on the new assessment form for the Dutch students is based on the taxonomy of educational objectives; classification of educational goals Bloom, B., Englehart, M. Furst, E., Hill, W., & Krathwohl, D. (1956). Students needed to go through the stages of Bloom's taxonomy every week; Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Being Synthesis the stage enabling students to plan, revise, hypothesize and formulate learning objectives to produce a report or portfolio. However, it will be the next step, Evaluation, the stage at which a student can conclude, assess, solve and have critical thinking on his/her own learning outcomes.

Instructors monitored throughout the process in the project and the stages of the template were observed and offered assistance to students who asked for it. It was evident that when students had a deeper knowledge on the way they were to reflect and assess themselves and peer assessment they felt much more confident and engage in the way they reflected their own learning outcomes in their diaries. Many of them could identify their learning objectives easier and therefore reflect on them, and readjust on time to achieve some of their learning objectives. However, as in previous editions of the project, engagement is key to embrace self-assessment activities, low engagement results in poor reflection on self-performance and therefore sustainable learning does not occur.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Developing reflective skill provides students with the ability to consider their own performance and identify their strengths, weaknesses, and areas that require improvement. Such activities can encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Students that become more active in their learning process could alter the perception of learning as being a passive process. If students are participants rather than "spectators", they are more likely to engage in their learning Biggs, J. (1999). However, students need to understand and be able to work with self-reflective assessment tools, such as a Learning Diary. If not students would disengage easily and would not reflect in depth and therefore their sustainable learning process would not occur. It is recommended to monitor the process in which students are immersed and assist when necessary in decoding whatever reflective method used in the assessment.

Communicating the reasons for implementing self-assessment is essential. If students understand, through self-assessment in Learning Diaries, and learn how to effectively interpret criteria, it will benefit them and help them develop skills for lifelong learning. Moreover, it will help students who are reluctant to use self-assessment as a valid and reliable method of assessing their achievements to take responsibility in their learning process.

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