

Case study: Using an OSLE to support academic mentoring of students who are on placement

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This case study illustrates use of an Online Synchronous Learning Environment (OSLE) within the context of a Bachelor of Arts programme in Performing Arts Management at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. This programme of studies focuses on production and strategic management, cultural policy, people management governance and law, budgetary control, marketing and PR, funding, fundraising and development, festival management, venue management, producing and career development and has at its core a placement programme, vital to the facilitating of experiential learning in the student to enable the understanding of the contents of the programme within context.

Context of use

The OSLE was used as a means by which the academic tutor could provide individual support for students who were in placement settings, in relation to their practical workplace learning and their personal development. One student was based in London and two students were based in Edinburgh.

It was hoped that use of the OSLE would greatly enhance the students' experience whilst on placement and that they would benefit from being able to speak to their tutor directly, making the placement less removed from the institution and assisting at all levels of communication and personal development.

In this example, the OSLE was used as a means by which the tutor could communicate individually with his students to provide mentoring support while students were off-campus in work-based settings.

The OSLE

The OSLE used during this study was Wimba Classroom version 5 – through this software students and tutor were able to log into a secure, online classroom, where audio and digital materials could be shared and discussed in large groups or in smaller breakout groups.

“An OSLE is a web-based computer mediated communication (CMC) program, which enables any combination of learners, tutors, and subject experts to meet ‘virtually’, in ‘real time’, for the purpose of natural interaction and shared communication, in respect of a learning activity”

Tutor and students were able to talk to each other in real time through the OSLE interface and could supplement this using a text ‘chat’ tool. Through use of a webcam, it was possible to see a video of the person who was speaking. If required, sessions could be recorded and archived for later use.

Tutor and learner experiences

This tutor had high expectations of the OSLE tool initially and his first experiences of using the tool with his students were “extremely positive”.

“I’ve really enjoyed being able to support the students face-to-face. They seem to like it too”

One student also reported positively of her initial experience:

“My first impressions were generally good. I did enjoy it and I found it really easy to use”

The benefits

A key benefit highlighted by the tutor and students in this example was the flexibility that the tool offered for different types of use. For example, use of the OSLE provided opportunities for private meetings, informal conversations, interactions with experts, as well as a new approach to the working environment.

Privacy and formality versus informality

Students in this example had very clear preferences for the type of interaction they wished to have with their academic tutor through the OSLE – and the fact that the OSLE is flexible enough to be used in these different ways is important given that circumstance will vary from student to student. For example, one student appreciated the formality and confidentiality that the OSLE afforded:

“What I did appreciate was the ability ... like only one person can press talk at each time to get their point across. And there’s a lot more order about that... so I did appreciate the formality of that.... ...the confidentiality thing and me having to have a specific password to see specific rooms, I did appreciate that...”

From a different perspective, the tutor reported how one student particularly liked the informality offered by the OSLE, both in allowing her to choose when to arrange a meeting, as well as the more personal nature of the communication that the OSLE facilitated when compared with email or telephone.

“I think that’s important, the informality... having the opportunity to decide when you want to meet with your tutor or whatever... ...I think this adds a new dimension... ... it’s a very peculiarly... interpersonal thing that you don’t get with telephone calls and you don’t get with email”

Access to experts

The OSLE offered prospects for interaction with subject experts – opportunities which are not always possible through more traditional means due to time factors or prohibitive travel costs.

“...being able to have students speaking to practitioners all over the world is phenomenal...”

A new approach to the working environment

The tutor found that use of the OSLE offered personal benefits for him, such as providing an opportunity to learn new skills, and more importantly, it enabled him to balance his work-life relationship in a new and more empowering way. He was able to move from the office and yet still function in his role as tutor:

“It’s been of enormous benefit... ...it’s given a completely new dimension to my working life which is quite phenomenal really. Being able to log on to the [institution’s] system and being

able to check email has been great, but then to go that next step so wherever anyone is in the world, to be able to communicate and to teach students, to mentor students and to have that freedom away from the desk..."

Impact on the learner

The tutor noted that use of the OSLE appeared to encourage growth and maturity in the students, with development of greater autonomy:

"...it gives them a sense of maturity as well, or a sense of their own responsibility"

"...the student is able to decide where they want to be, so it gives a level of autonomy to them"

Some challenges

While the tutor was excited by the concept of communicating and supporting his students through use of an OSLE, he did encounter certain limitations with the specific tool used in this study. These included a lack of intuitiveness about the functionality of the system, disappointment regarding the quality of the audio and video elements, and issues relating to spontaneity of communication. Other challenges were noted in relation to use of video communication in general and some of the students' anxieties.

Functionality of the system

Although the tutor and students initially reported finding the system easy to use, it was later reported that they had found the OSLE to be complicated and less intuitive than first anticipated.

"It's a bit cumbersome. I wish it was a bit simpler... I wish it was a bit more intuitive"

The tutor felt the complexity of the system could induce stress if tutors were using the OSLE with groups of students, particularly if students were making use of functions within the system, such as 'hand raising', 'smiley faces', or text chat and he reflected that he had found communicating with a group through the OSLE to be tiring:

"I think the thing I found most extraordinary about that was how tiring... how tired I felt. How tiring it was as a means of communication"

Audio and video quality

The qualities of the video and audio elements were found to fluctuate and this was frustrating for the tutor and students alike. One concern was that the poor quality did at times interfere with the communication between tutor and students with the result that understanding of conversation was sometimes difficult.

"...because I know the student and because I have had lots of sessions with her one-to-one, I was able to pick up a lot of what she was saying even though it was difficult to hear"

Spontaneity of communication

The students expressed irritation at the lack of spontaneity in communication afforded by the particular OSLE used in this example. The students compared their experiences with their use of Skype and other similar communication tools and were keen for a future OSLE tool to include similar instant functionality.

"...I guess that would be one thing I would like to improve... to appear on webcam and be able just to talk instead of having to push a button, that way I guess I could make notes as well... it would be a bit more relaxed"

Video communication anxieties

The tutor voiced some concerns in relation to the students' reaction to use of video communication. One concern related to anxiety regarding being 'seen on video' – the tutor believed this to be a gender specific factor:

"...I think a lot of it is to do with perception of how they're being viewed on a screen. I certainly think there's a gender specific thing here that ... the boys tended not to worry about it but the girls were very self-conscious and the idea of being on video was sometimes quite distracting for them"

A further concern related to the idea of personal space and the tutor felt this could have been a reason for some students preferring not to become involved in using the OSLE for individual tutorials.

"...you are coming into someone's space and you're aware of you know that you might have a bedroom or sitting room that's piled high with things. You know, you wouldn't necessarily invite someone into that... you'd have a good old tidy up before you invited someone round..."

Concluding thoughts

The tutor was enthusiastic regarding the concept of using an OSLE with his students for

personal academic support. He believed it offered a more personal form of communication but also provided flexibility for different contexts of use. Use of an OSLE may challenge tutors to consider their approach to working online and in particular to re-evaluate their communication skills and to be responsive to student needs and preferences.

The student response to using the OSLE was encouraging and the flexibility offered by the tool in accommodating varying preferences such as formality versus informality was appreciated by these students. It should be recognised, however, that use of such a tool may not be for everyone and some students may feel a degree of anxiety at communicating in this way – either through feeling self-conscious when first using a webcam, or in relation to their perception of personal space.

Use of an OSLE in the context of academic mentoring of students on placement offers future potential for a new dimension of communication and support which is more personal, and which can offer greater flexibility and freedom for tutor and students alike.

Resources

- The project report is available online: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/palatine/documents/OSLE.pdf>

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