Demystifying assessment with ‘bells and whistles’ in a first year communication course

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This paper reports on the use of multimedia technology to help students (particularly external students) understand the requirements and processes involved in two linked pieces of assessment in a first year undergraduate communication core course. The use of a CD for course materials linked to a wider Transmodal environment at the University of Southern Queensland attempts to give the students greater access to resources via a variety of modal channels beyond a static written presentation. Research to date suggests that many students are finding the interactive elements of the Transmodal environment helpful in breaking down the requirements of assessment items. This case study investigates two linked pieces of assessment (preliminary plan Assignment 1 and final essay Assignment 3). Some of the multimedia elements used to support these assignments items are described in the paper to reveal that ‘bells and whistles’ can be more than novelty attention-grabbers but can give practical and clear guidance to students as they approach their assessment.

Introduction

At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), external courses have traditionally been delivered via static print-based packages. However, advances in technology, such as learning management systems (LMS) and a greater use of multimedia in the educational environment have provided many opportunities for lecturers to enrich students’ learning experiences by providing significant variety within learning environments. To take better advantage of these advances in technology, in a major policy shift in early 2003, USQ decided that all courses of study would begin to be developed into what is now ‘Transmodal Delivery’. Central to this approach is a resource-rich e-environment (mostly CD-based) containing all essential study materials supported with significant multimedia-based enhancements and online support. This offers the opportunity to provide a range of media elements to enhance learning, teaching, and assessment opportunities. As 75% of USQ students study externally, it was hoped that these media rich environments would not only enhance the student learning experience by providing alternative ways of accessing core content, but would also give lecturers practical tools to scaffold learning towards specific learning outcomes. As this represented a fundamentally new approach to the delivery of courses at USQ, significant evaluation to underpin its development was required.

This paper reports on the Transmodal delivery of a first year foundation course (CMS1000: Communication and Scholarship) provided to on-campus and external students each semester. The CD-based version of this course was first made available to external students in 2005 and later extended to on-campus students in 2006. A broad research project has been underway since its initial deployment and this paper will draw on significant aspects of the analysis associated with this research. In particular this case study will highlight the opportunity for student engagement provided by the inclusion of multimedia-based elements used to support two linked pieces of assessment (a preliminary essay plan and a major essay). This research has confirmed that students are responding very positively to this form of course delivery.

What underpins the CMS1000 course design

Integral to the design of the CMS1000 materials is the premise that students learn in different ways, that each individual has a preferred learning modality (Sarisin, 1999). Further, when this is taken into account and materials are
designed to cater for multiple sensory channels, information processing can become more effective (Kearnsley, 2000). As the CD-based materials for CMS1000 were formatted in a way to permit them to be viewed as HTML pages, this allowed for a range of navigation features to be incorporated. These not only gave the course leader additional options as to what could be provided (links to additional resources both on the CD and on the internet), it also gave students a greater level of informed choice, or control, over how they accessed the resources available to them. This level of control, particularly as it relates to the use of multiple representations, has been seen by Ainsworth and Van Labeke (2002) to significantly improve the learning opportunities for students. For example, if a student prefers to listen to, or view a particular concept, as opposed to read it (or do both), they may. This aspect of the environment was seen by CMS1000 students to be extremely helpful, it made the process of learning (for many) more enjoyable, which in turn made the materials (for some) easier to learn.

CD-based technology is readily accessible by virtually all USQ students and although access to the Internet is problematic for students in locations with minimal access, the use of the CD limits the amount of time students are required to have this access. The CD also allows considerable standardisation among courses – core generic information such as ‘getting started’ information, help files, software updates and plug-ins can all be provided. It also contains specific course elements such as introductory materials (course specification, assessment schedule, sample assignments), a study guide, study modules, selected readings, multimedia elements, audio enhanced PowerPoint presentations, interactive quizzes, case studies, reference lists, and web links.

As it is now USQ policy that all students require some access to the Internet to fully participate in their courses, CD delivery is further supported by additional activities housed on USQ’s LMS (USQConnect). USQConnect provides students with their own electronic Study Desk with links to all their courses. This offers the opportunity for the course leader to establish forums to enable students to interact with each other and the lecturer. Announcements and updates are also made available where appropriate. USQConnect also provides links to library services, the USQ Bookshop, USQAssist (where students may find answers to questions related to USQ systems), and USQAdmin (where students enrol, change personal details, access results, etc). This system plays an important facilitating role in student support and communication.

Some external students can, at times, feel alienated, particularly in the early stages of study. Therefore, to make this mode of studying more dynamic for CMS1000 students, it was decided to provide resources to enable more interaction with the learning environment and to have more contact with the lecturer and peers. This was achieved by using a combination of the CD environment and USQConnect, particularly discussion forums. The philosophy underlying this approach is one of social constructivism which suggests that knowledge is created by shared experience, a process vital in cognitive development (Hung, 2001). Maor (2003) states that social constructivism regards ‘individual cognition as occurring within a social context and suggests that collaboration between individuals in a social learning environment is an essential aspect of any educational experience.’ (p. 128). It is important that this theory be considered when developing e-learning environments for external students, to create more meaningful learning experience and to lessen their sense of isolation.

The application to CMS1000 assessment items

CMS1000 is a first year core undergraduate course offered by the Faculty of Arts, with yearly enrolments between 1000-1500. The course offers students the opportunity to gain understanding of the academic and psychological dimensions of communication. Academic writing, critical thinking, research, oral communication, interpersonal, group, nonverbal communication and barriers to communication form the basis of the course. The course refers to different models of communication, but highlights the importance of the transactional process. This model reflects the dynamic nature of communication and describes how different channels of communication can be effective in different contexts. It was therefore appropriate that the course should itself use these different channels.

The course currently has four assessment items, a preliminary essay plan, an oral presentation a major essay and a report (Table 1); there is no final exam. This paper will focus on items 1 and 3 and the multimedia elements used to support these items.
Assignment 1: The preliminary essay plan

The first assessment item asks students to construct an essay plan in preparation for their major essay due later in the semester. This item is known as the preliminary essay plan (PEP) and is designed for students (usually first years) to engage with the course material early in the semester (Week 3 or 4). The weighting of the assignment has been kept low (10%) but its importance is highlighted as it is linked to a major assignment (an essay worth 35%). There are two parts to the PEP assignment. Part A asks students to write a plan with thesis statement, main points and supporting points for the whole essay. They are given a diagrammatic plan to complete and are advised to have original main points. The idea is to give them a strong starting point where they are controlling the essay process and using references to support (not replace) their line of argument. Students are given a model of a plan which is developed in three phases. Each new phase adds a new layer to explain the processes at work.

To help students understand these concepts a number of multimedia elements provide key information in a variety of modes – textual (written), visual and aural (auditory). Students have responded to this multimodal approach in a very positive way. Examples of these elements are seen in Figure 1. Students are presented with a series of diagrammatic representations visually elaborating on the stages of planning for an essay; these animate as the lecturer explains each of the elements within the diagram.

As part of the research into CMS1000 students were asked to respond to the following statement: “The interactive multimedia features (such as the diagrams with explanations) were more helpful to me than the static, print based representations”. Of the 188 responses received 71% agreed with this statement, 15% disagreed and 14% choose ‘no opinion’ (Figure 2). One student commented “The animated diagrams, they were particularly useful...especially when you are getting your ideas together at the beginning, and you are taken step by step through that diagram.”
In Part B of Assignment 1 students are asked to write their introduction and first body paragraph, as well as a bibliography of at least five sources. This is where Part A is critical as they need forward planning for the whole essay so that they can incorporate the main points in the overview and introduction. The assignment appears simple but there are important academic skills underpinning it (planning, developing arguments, structure, referencing in terms of format and integration, and tone of writing). Students are advised to treat the assignment as a learning tool and to use the feedback to help with their major essay.

To help students understand some of the complexities of correctly referencing their sources there is significant information supplied within the materials and links made to referencing guidelines. Imbedded within the module, and in the guidelines for each assignment, links are provided to an interactive multimedia referencing exercise housed on the CD. This formative activity (Figure 3) allows student to practise their referencing in a non-threatening way before committing what they do to paper. The activity can be reset and repeatedly performed. Links are also made to a style guide if necessary.

Since Assignment 1 is directly related to Assignment 3 (the major essay), there are clear links made to Assignment 3. Within the Assignment 1 guidelines students can navigate to the Assignment 3 topics (these form the basis of
Assignment 1). Students are also provided a link to a sample assignment, if they are unsure of formatting and style requirements. This has proved a particularly popular feature, as this comment indicates:

“One fantastic element of the CD was that it provided templates and examples of the assignments...I have been out of school for 5 years, without those templates and examples I would not have had any idea how to construct my assignments. None whatsoever. So they were just a Godsend”.

Our research has indicated that the PEP (Assignment 1) proved to be particularly helpful (for those students responding to the PEP survey) in five key areas (Kiernan, Lawrence & Sankey, 2006), it:

- provided them with more confidence as they approached Assignment 3,
- helped their planning for the essay, knowing what they had done was relevant,
- improved their time management, as it got them started on Assignment 3 earlier,
- helped them in relation to engagement with the course materials early in the semester, and
- helped them gauge how well they were coping with university study, by receiving some early feedback, particularly in relation to academic writing and referencing.

The importance of this last aspect, particularly for first year students, is reflected in the following comment: “It helped me to gauge my communication and scholarship abilities and university studies in general - boosting my confidence that I can manage well.”

Assignment 3: Essay

While the students can ‘test the water’ with Assignment 1, the linked piece of assessment, the essay, is much more challenging. Students are helped through this process in a number of ways, by the written word and through various multimedia elements. Firstly, there is a mini lecture or audio enhanced PowerPoint presentation (Breeze) addressing the structural elements of an essay. Figure 4 is a screen capture from this presentation showing the second PowerPoint slide being narrated. On the left hand side there is a list of all the slides in the presentation. Students can navigate to these, pause or fast forward the presentation as required.

This feature has proved particularly popular for external students who cannot benefit from a face-to-face interaction, with the lecturer’s voiceover to the slides helping many students make a ‘connection’ with the course and the lecturer. For example:

“The CD is a link to the university in a special way. How? Well the CD has a lecturer speaking to us. Books are good and very useful; however they can sometimes be dry and rather static. Is not any learning, especially for one’s career supposed to be DYNAMIC?”
Another student stated that, “Sometimes reading is not enough to get it into your head and it needs to be spoken, the CD completes that need effectively”. Once a connection is made with the students, it becomes easier for them to listen and gain insights into the processes involved. It also has an interesting by-product; several students, who stated they were afraid to make contact with the lecturer, became less inhibited and more willing to seek help once they had heard the multimedia presentations which adopt a light and friendly style and tone.

A further multimedia element included to help students prepare for their essay in an exercise in which a sample essay is deconstructed for them. The lecturer narrates an interactive display where the essay is broken down into different parts and explained. The display is animated so that when one aspect is addressed it is highlighted on the screen (Figure 5). This has proved to be a particularly useful way to reinforce the written sections of the module, as seeing the essay deconstructed in such a clear way has helped students to understand the importance of planning and structure in an essay. Students are also supplied with a PDF version of the same essay which they can print out and refer to while viewing this presentation. One student said of this feature:

“...the sample printable essays, they were brilliant. Absolutely brilliant to show us the format of how to do things, which I think allowed us to get the marks that we got.”

Another feature used on the CD is an essay checklist. In this checklist the different processes involved in the essay are listed. Students are able to access more information about a particular aspect by placing the cursor over the word ‘HINT’ (Figure 6). Once this is clicked, a short paragraph emerges giving information to clarify the idea. Students are asked to check each item to help them identify areas they may have inadvertently overlooked.
While the above discussion refers to specific multimedia elements relating expressly to the essay, there are other features that also contribute to the assessment in terms of generating ideas for the content. There are several video presentations included on the CD (Figure 7) where ‘experts’ are interviewed about particular content areas within course. The idea here is to give students something extra; particularly important for external students. For example, in one semester there was a topic relating to the risks and benefits of self-disclosure in communication and the video snippet included a psychologist who had some interesting insights into this topic.

While the CD has proved a very useful resource for helping students with their assessment work, the use of USQConnect discussion forums was also an important part of the course design with the majority of students finding them very helpful. As many of these forums focus on the assessment items this strategy is clearly an advantage, but its success at a first year level, depends almost entirely on the active participation of the lecturer in this environment modelling good and appropriate behaviours. This is supported by the following comment:

“Since the lecturer was always on hand for assistance (on discussion desk) and with fast helpful responses it worked very well. If the lecturer was not as approachable I don’t think it would work as well.”

An emphasis is placed on the importance of the discussion group in different parts of the CD and over the semesters it has developed into a vital link with the students who need help with their assessment work.

Overall it can be seen that the interactive elements used on the CD were very highly valued by the students with 77% identifying them as helpful in learning the content, with only 7% indicating they didn’t find them helpful (Figure 8). This positive sentiment may be summed up in the following two comments:

“I found them extremely helpful - made me feel more a part of the class as well”. And “The different ways of learning catered for my specific needs very well and I appreciated the time taken to include all the different learning methods.”

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**Figure 7. Video snippet of interview present of the CMS1000 CD.**

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**Figure 8 (left). Percentage response to question 7 (CMS1000 survey).**
**Figure 9 (right). Percentage response to question 14 (CMS1000 survey).**
Students opt for CD based option

By producing course material in this way USQ has moved away from its traditional print-based materials; in doing so it was important to ascertain what combination of resources students actually prefer. As part of this research, CMS1000 students were asked to ‘Please choose your ideal combination of learning materials’. Figure 9 shows how students responded to this question. The majority (87%) chose to receive the CD and to either print what they required for themselves, or purchase a printed version from the bookshop. Ten percent of students identified they wanted to receive ‘only print materials’, while 2% chose to receive only the CD. The research team believes this clearly supports the case being made above; that the use of multimedia in the CD environment provides sufficient advantage to the students, enough to warrant them buying, or printing for themselves, a printed version of the materials.

Conclusion

Assessment for first year students can be a daunting experience, particularly for external students who do not have the same level of contact with lecturers. Any system that can help bridge this gap is a positive step especially in terms of assessment items. In the CMS1000 Transmodal environment multimedia elements are used to deconstruct and demystify the processes of assessment via a combination of embedded multimedia elements, extra resources and discussion forums housed on USQConnect. This case study has focussed on these two pieces of linked assessment where multimedia elements were added to explain requirements and processes in a systemic and gradual way. The use of templates and multimedia-based presentations has given students other channels to reinforce principles and concepts contained in the written part of the study materials. This multimodal approach appears to have been effective and is particularly useful to external students where aspects of Transmodal delivery, such as the discussion group, interactive displays and audio-enhanced PowerPoint presentations have helped to ease the feelings of isolation and create more confidence. There are some students, though, who do not avail themselves of the technology, so the challenge remains for lecturers and designers to encourage student use of the ‘bells and whistles’; to give them every opportunity to do well with their assessment items.

References


