



# Student readiness: Training and re-training in online higher education

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# Introduction

- ▶ Hew and Cheung (2014) suggest a list of five pre-conditions which they define as being critical for a successful blended learning environment to thrive:
  1. Institutional support
  2. Infrastructural readiness
  3. Content readiness
  4. Instructor readiness
  5. Learner readiness
- ▶ This study focuses on learner readiness

# Context of the study

- ▶ A small island economy such as the Maltese islands.
- ▶ In pre Covid-19 times, the economy was undergoing a period of growth which was **already** being hampered by the lack of suitably skilled workforce.
- ▶ This was very much pronounced in the tourism and hospitality sector.
- ▶ The Covid-19 pandemic escalated further this problem.
- ▶ The study was carried with a group of students reading for the bachelor of tourism studies at the University of Malta, as research participants.

# Effective teaching in higher education (HE)

- ▶ It has been argued that to have an effective teaching environment (in HE) there has to be:
  - ▶ Student involvement in learning
  - ▶ An improvement in the teaching/learning climate
  - ▶ Reflective teaching
  - ▶ Teacher development
- (Biggs and Tang, 2011)

# Student involvement

- ▶ In very simple terms, from a student's point of view, to increase student engagement, teaching/learning activities set for students must be:
- ▶ Important – learners attribute some value to it and therefore consider it worth doing
- ▶ Learners expect some level of success when engaging with a given task (Biggs & Tang 2011, p.35)

# The teaching/learning climate

- ▶ An analogy was made using the theory X and theory Y organizational climate theory (Mcgregor, 1960)
- ▶ Theory X teachers assume that students do not want to learn and will cheat at every instance provided, if allowed. Thus they must **NOT** be given any control over their learning.
- ▶ Theory Y teachers think that students perform best when freedom and space to use their own judgement. A minimum of formalization is required for the institution to function, but too much is seen as counterproductive.

# Transformative reflection/improving teaching

- ▶ This occurs when one is able to reflect on a past teaching experience and see whether it is possible to improve it.
- ▶ To do so, teachers must constantly stay up-to-date with research being carried out in the field of education.
- ▶ Feedback is equally important. This can be obtained from:
  1. One's own reflections on his/her teaching
  2. The students
  3. A colleague acting as a 'critical friend'
  4. A staff developer who can offer informed advice

# Challenges faced by higher educational institutions (HEI's)

- ▶ The 21<sup>st</sup> century has put increased the responsibilities on HEI's in order to improve the 'quality' of graduates. At the same HEI's have to respond to a number of challenges that were less pronounced in previous years.
  1. The increase in student numbers
  2. The HE student 'type'
  3. The Bologna process (and similar programs)



# Increase in student numbers

- ▶ Some nations have set a target of having 40% of students acquiring 'university' education. Others went even further (60%), as it is seen as the way forward for the economies to thrive.
- ▶ Indeed, the EU educational policy (EC, 2012) was set at 40% for those who will be in the 30-34 age bracket by 2020.

# The student 'type'

- ▶ The increase in the cohort of students acquiring university education increased student diversity. An increase in mobility has enabled students from across the globe to travel to study, with Europe being one of the main destinations.
- ▶ However, some students may find the modes of learning found in the host country alien to the ones they are accustomed to.
- ▶ Another aspect is that of the motivation behind enrollment. Some are highly motivated – they are almost self-motivated to learning by themselves. Others are more passive – they see university education as improving job prospects (get the piece of paper). The “Susan’s and the “Roberts” (Biggs and Tang, 2011)

# The Bologna process

- ▶ Academic institutions across the European continent (and other areas of the world), had to undergo a series of reforms in order to ensure the mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications.
- ▶ The ultimate aim was to improve mobility within Europe for both work and study. (as outlined in the 1999 Bologna Declaration)

# Research approach

- ▶ A qualitative approach was considered ideal in order to be able to look for detail.
- ▶ A blended learning environment (BLE) was devised and a representative group of student participants from the University's of Malta institute of tourism, travel and culture, were asked to interact with it.
- ▶ An initial focus group was carried out which served to gather an initial set of data but also served to identify areas where the BLE was updated, based upon the students' suggestions.
- ▶ Students had a second round of interaction with the BLE after which a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out individually.

# Findings

- ▶ Thematic analysis was employed for the analysis of the data.
- ▶ Data was first reviewed to identify any significant patterns that could be identified. This was done by both manual and electronic means.
- ▶ By means of an iterative process, the patterns were further reviewed to determine the key codes and ultimately the main themes that could be used to interpret the data.
- ▶ A subsequent exercise was to go over the themes and determine any major sub-themes with the key themes themselves.

# Theme 1 – A question of attitude

- ▶ During the initial focus group but even more so, the aspect of students (and even academics) attitudes towards blended learning environments was seen as significant by the student participants.
- ▶ Further analysis suggested that there were two subthemes:
  1. **Attitude towards working within a blended learning environment**
  2. **Commitment**

# Subtheme 1.1 – Attitude towards working within a BLE (1)

- ▶ The majority of participants indicated a preference for face-to-face contact, in spite of being given training prior to working with the BLE and a series of customized manuals to work with.
- ▶ Physical presence is seen as a guarantee of quality in terms of teaching and assessment.
- ▶ Physical presence is also better in terms of engaging in discussion with peers and lecturers.
- ▶ Challenges outlined by earlier researchers (e.g. Bath and Bourke, 2010) still hold.

# Subtheme 1.1 – Attitude towards working within a BLE (2)

- ▶ This preference may be explained by the fact that students lamented they had very little training in the use of online environments earlier on. Academics use the available online platforms rather sparingly, if at all.
- ▶ Academics were labelled 'traditionalist' at best!
- ▶ With the training given, students were able to see more value in the use of the online environment. Although their preference was to revert to social networks whenever possible as they were seen as easier to use and continuously available (on their mobile devices)



# Subtheme 1.2 – Commitment counts (in large amounts)

- ▶ Working online was perceived as requiring more effort and focus.
- ▶ Some (student participants) complained that they are not being asked to the job of the academic.
- ▶ The issue was not the process, but the additional workload – they argued that they are already overloaded and barely coping.
- ▶ On the other hand, peer-based tasks were seen as useful. (if supported adequately such as being provided with marking rubrics to facilitate the task itself)

## Theme 2 – A question of trust... again

- ▶ While peer-based exercises were seen as very useful, the view was that when it comes to assessment, the academics should have a final say as they provide a 'fair' assessment.
- ▶ On the other hand, peers were seen as unreliable – “depends who carries out the assessment”. Some may find it difficult (the peer assessment exercise, others may simply not bother to take it seriously). They have enough on their hands – more work may not be taken kindly.

## Subtheme 2.1 – Student maturity

- ▶ Participants pointed out that this exercise required not only commitment but also a level of maturity in order to take part, work on the tasks given, review and grade other students' work, provide feedback and so on.
- ▶ Too much work may alienate some. Not all student 'types' would initially have the right combination of knowledge, skills and commitment requested.
- ▶ However, many acknowledged that once they familiarized themselves, they found the peer-based exercises very useful for their own work (even if hard work).

# Conclusions

- ▶ The lack of confidence in working with the BLE made it more challenging to work with and generated mistrust in outcome of the peer-exercises ('if I don't know how to use it, others too don't...')
- ▶ While training on the use of the online platform is fundamental, it must also cover skills and competences that would permit the learners to manage their own learning, that is, acquiring the right meta-cognitive skills.



# Thank you

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