The Higher Education Academy

Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Assessment of 'Theories of welfare' using a VLE (Blackboard)

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Building resources for pooling pedagogic practice in Social Policy

Getting students to "sample the 'real' thing"

Assessment of 'Theories of welfare' using a VLE (Blackboard)

Origins

- Development of a strategy to encourage students to read primary theoretical texts on a level 2 unit

- Responding to institutional pressures to develop VLEs as a teaching tool.

Assessment in action

- Two components of assessment: 80% by conventional essay; 20% via the VLE

- VLE assessment undertaken in two stages, only the second stage is formally assessed

Stage 1: A set of 'gateway' multiple choice questions which must be answered correctly to enter stage 2. Immediate feedback is provided and these questions are attempted until answered correctly.

Stage 2: Comprehension exercises on excerpts relating to each of 5 theoretical topics. Students must attempt all 5 exercises.

The problems encountered

- 'system failure' – the VLE conditions treated all 'entries' as submissions for both the gateway questions and the comprehension exercises thus students were unable to draft their answers and then amend at a later date prior to submission (a 'warning' was later posted at the site as this problem emerged)

- Records of VLE usage could not distinguish between students simply 'having a look' at the question and students 'submitting' the question (the same symbol in the VLE was used for both activities). Thus students who had experienced genuine technical difficulties could not be distinguished from those who had merely entered the VLE and not actually submitted answers.

Benefits in terms of students' learning?

• Access to, and familiarity with original texts used in the lectures (often not in the library/out of print)

• The 'gateway' questions developed foundation knowledge without penalising incorrect answers.

Benefits for teaching

• knowing that students had to read original sources (and that many students actually enjoyed reading these) in order to complete this element of the assessment.

• Monitoring student progress through records of usage of the VLE.

Feedback and evaluation

'Students found the technical problems very frustrating and an unnecessary barrier to what is, already, a quite difficult unit…evaluation for this aspect of the assessment resulted in our Assessment of 'Theories of welfare' using a VLE (Blackboard) overall assessment for the unit to be much lower than in previous years. From the staff perspective, the assessment via the VLE was equally as frustrating and very time-consuming'

• The 'gateway' questions worked well but the limitations of the programme were apparent in assessment requiring multiple entries to the VLE

• The problems arising from the use of Blackboard in this type of assessed work led to the VLE component being discounted in the final assessment despite student effort to submit and staff marking work.

• Following this experience in 2000/01, the VLE has not since been used in assessment for this module.

'I do know that other colleagues are having a far more productive time with it than we did on this course. I wouldn't rule it out for some of my teaching again in the future, but would have to be careful about what kinds of assessment I chose with it.'