Open Space Learning in Real World Contexts: Impact assessment

This report offers a review of the evaluation of the Open Space Learning (OSL) project carried out by Dr Barry Sheils. The evaluation report offers a comprehensive analysis of how the project demonstrates impact as measured against the indicators identified in the project bid: reporting the positive engagement of around one thousand students across all four faculties at the University of Warwick, and an average of 250 hits on the OSL website providing resources relating to the OSL approach each day from October to May.

This review considers:

- how the work of the OSL project is situated within the institutional context;
- the approaches adopted to both the project and its evaluation;
- the way in which collaboration between the project team and colleagues across the institution has been fostered; and
- the dissemination strategies adopted to support embedding of an OSL approach.

The report also reflects on important next steps for developing the work of the OSL project including: supporting a variety of student learning preferences through immersive learning experiences, supporting colleagues to manage student apprehension to these new activities, supporting students to reflect on their learning as part of an OSL approach and further evaluation of how technology can support this approach.

Overview

The Open Space Learning project is clearly grounded within Warwick's institutional strategy targeted at offering students an innovative learning experience. The evaluation report highlights how the project has built on the success of the two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) previously housed at Warwick (the Reinvention Centre and the CAPITAL Centre) and feeds directly into the work of the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) established in 2010. The OSL project is also focused on addressing priority areas emerging within higher education; targeting issues highlighted in the Browne review including improving the student experience, supporting employability and personal development, and the issue of providing high quality feedback as identified in the National Student Survey. The project is appropriately grounded in pedagogic theory underpinning

effective teaching and learning in higher education which facilitates the plans to embed it across the institution.

Around three thousand students have been involved in OSL style workshops over the last five years and one thousand students, from twelve different departments, have been directly involved in the work of the OSL project. Engagement across all four faculties means that the positive impact of the project is widely distributed across the institution, further supporting the embedding of this teaching and learning approach.

The project evaluation report highlights how adopting an open space approach can offer benefits in higher education including enhancing student recall, increasing motivation and engagement and developing creativity. This has been clearly demonstrated through the enhancement to students' writing and oral presentations. Students have responded positively to these opportunities: 90% of those involved reported that they would recommend the approach to fellow students and 60% reported that OSL provided a distinctive way of developing a deeper understanding of their subject. The evaluation report highlights how, in particular, the OSL approach is effective for developing students' understanding of abstract or complex topics as well as supporting the development of transferable skills. A further impact, based on the success of the OSL project, has been the introduction of new initiatives across the institution including the creation of a chair of Creative Education in Warwick Business School, a joint venture between the Business School and Royal Shakespeare Company to form the Centre for Teaching Shakespeare and a proposal from the IATL to run an interdisciplinary module.

The evaluation report brings these findings to life through quotes from students, lead learners and practitioners and multi-media links which allow interested parties to find out more. In addition the report highlights some of the challenges connected with adopting an OSL approach, including student apprehension, and starts to consider how these might be addressed.

Approaches

The OSL evaluation report offers a considered rationale for the approaches adopted to both the project and its evaluation, including reflection on how the approach adopted to funding departmental projects was targeted at supporting colleagues to make most effective use of the project team's expertise, and the way in which students could be actively engaged in the project.

Feedback was collected from the full range of stakeholders including students, lead learners and staff providing an over-arcing picture of the project's implementation and development. These critical reflections would support other institutions considering implementing a similar approach to plan appropriately for their context.

Collaboration

The project has been clearly focused on developing a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to embedding the OSL teaching methodology, aiming to engage individuals from all areas of the institution including staff from both academic and support departments as well as postgraduate and undergraduate students. This collaborative relationship is highlighted through case studies which detail how OSL practitioners worked with staff from a variety of departments to build on existing practices and identify the most appropriate strategies for implementing this new approach.   Adoption of this collaborative approach will help to facilitate its continued success once the project funding comes to an end, through providing professional development for staff and embedding OSL approaches within the departments. The project team also developed collaboration partnerships with colleagues nationally and internationally to disseminate the OSL approach through conferences, academic papers and jointly delivered workshops. This collaborative approach is one of the central tenets of the IATL.

Dissemination

The report highlights the importance of staff trained in OSL approaches working in partnership with teaching staff from within departments. Although some departments have already been involved due to the intensive nature of OSL methodology there are still many who are yet to have the opportunity to engage. The OSL project team clearly have a wealth of experience to share with colleagues and aim to do so through a range of activities including open seminars, conferences and publications. Three examples of these dissemination activities are listed here:

- On the 27th June the IATL hosted a dissemination event which was well attended by colleagues from across the institution and beyond, allowing participants to hear from individuals (including staff, students and lead learners) who had been involved in working with the OSL team and the benefits of this engagement for student learning. The day provided the opportunity to engage with the principles of OSL and tenets of the IATL and explore how these fitted with current approaches to teaching and learning within higher education. It also offered a chance to experience some of the OSL approaches first hand.

- The OSL website offers a variety of activity frameworks that can be adapted by teaching colleagues for their own particular context or discipline. The number of visitors to this website is impressive, averaging 250 hits a day with a total of 540,000 hits between October 2010 and May 2011, suggesting that colleagues across the institution are making good use of this valuable resource.
- The project team offer a workshop on Open Space Learning as part of the University's staff development programme and as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic and Professional Practice which is mandatory for all new lecturers with less than three years experience.

Next steps

In addition to the work already done as part of the Open Space Learning project the evaluation report suggests a number of areas that would benefit from further exploration:

- The way in which the OSL approach might support students with a variety of learning preferences, in particular providing students who excel through active and pragmatic learning with opportunities to be immersed in experiences which allow them to experiment with new ideas.
- How colleagues adopting an OSL approach can manage the feelings of disorientation or apprehensiveness experienced by students and build on this to offer a meaningful learning experience.
- How the OSL approach might be developed to support students to reflect on what they have learnt from engaging with the learning activities. Two of the case studies highlight this uncertainty so it is likely that students need to develop the skills to interpret and make use of the learning taking place through these activities in order to get the most out of them.
- Further evaluation of the way in which technology effectively supports the OSL approach through supporting reflection as well as integrating multimedia within sessions and creating digital archives of sessions.

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