THE IMPACT OF INTEGRATED COURSE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract: The article examines a blended learning concept for a university teacher training course for EFL teachers. The concept points at purposeful learning using different methods and activities, various traditional and electronic media, learning spaces covering contact and distance learning, and task-based learning modules that begin with multimedia-based case stories.

Key words: integrated course, blended learning, teacher training course, distance learning.

Introduction

The learning concept is based on theories of situated learning in multimedia-enhanced learning environments. The activities discussed include classroom recordings and multimedia-based case stories, an electronic interview with an expert who is an experienced grammar school teacher, and mini-practices, which implement micro teaching in a classroom setting.

Case stories used as a didactic tool in teacher education are supposed to contribute to a closer and more reflective relationship between theory-driven and practically-oriented aspects of teacher education. The multimedia-based case stories are hypertexts designed as essential components of computer-based learning modules that support various ways and styles of learning. Students worked with the case story material either in guided or in self-regulated scenarios several times during the course.

Main Part

Three types of learners could be distinguished: students who mainly create and apply experiences, students who mainly study the theoretical resources, and students who create with focused selection of resources. The e-interview promotes an exchange between theory and practical teaching and experience with this format of e-learning at the same time. The mini-practice offers guided insights into analyzing teaching materials, hands-on experiences with lesson planning and the experience of acting as a teacher in an authentic teaching context.

Furthermore, the mini-practice is meant to help the students broaden their perspectives on "English lessons at school" and change their perspective, that is, from a pupil's to a prospective teacher's. These activities combine contact learning and interactive e-learning. This combination is highly appreciated by our learners and represents our concept of integrated interactive e-learning and contact learning.

There are a number of potentially important situational factors that affect the design of the course, including:

1. Specific context of the teaching/learning situation. How many students are in the class? Is the course at the lower division, upper division, or graduate level? How long and frequent are the class meetings? Will the course be delivered live, online, in a laboratory, etc.? What physical elements of the learning environment will affect the class?

2. General context of the learning situation. What learning expectations are placed on this course by the university, the college, one or more of the institution's curricula, one or more professions, and society in general?

3. Nature of the subject. Is this subject primarily theoretical, practical, or a combination? Is it primarily convergent or divergent? Are there important controversies or recent changes within the field?

4. Characteristics of the learners. What are the life situations of the learners (what percent work, have family responsibilities, have a specific professional goal, etc)? What prior knowledge and experiences relevant to this subject have students had? What are their goals and expectations of the course? What are their preferred learning styles?

5. Characteristics of the teacher. What beliefs and values does the teacher have about teaching and learning? What level of knowledge does she/he have about the subject? What are his/her teaching strengths and weaknesses?

Situational factors impose definite limitations and guidelines on those seeking to design a significant learning experience. For example, if the course is intended to provide background for more advanced courses, it is essential to understand the expectations of those teaching such courses.

Similarly, if most students begin the class with an apathetic attitude toward the subject matter, the course design needs to recognize this and incorporate special motivational features. Once situational factors have been identified and considered, the instructor is prepared for the next step in the design process, namely the establishment of learning goals.

The purpose of instruction (and any other learning activity) is the promotion of student learning. All decisions relating to a given course (or other learning experience) — from the selection of reading materials to the assessment process — should be judged by their contribution to this end.

Conclusion

The quality of these decisions is a function of how well the course is designed and how well the design components are integrated. Because few college professors understand the concept of an integrated course design, and even fewer have the skill required to create one, this paper is offered as a way to improve this vital process. An integrated course design requires a significant investment in time, energy, and thought. But this expenditure has great potential for exerting a potent effect on student acquisition of "significant" (rather than trivial) learning.

Therefore, faculty members committed to improving their ability to facilitate significant learning are encouraged to adopt the processes described in this paper. There may be no "faculty development" activity with more potential and power for improving significant learning.

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