Optional Learning Activities for Personalising University Courses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on a specific, simple strategy to foster active blended learning, a pedagogical approach that values flexibility. The author discusses the use of optional learning activities (OLAs) in graduate courses as a strategy to enable the customisation of the learning pathway and the effective incorporation of formative assessment. A sample of 68 former Master's and doctoral students, who engaged with OLAs, answered an online survey. Their views were predominantly positive. Participants agreed that OLAs promote active, personalised learning, and considered them motivating. Moreover, the number of OLAs completed positively and significantly correlated with final grades. OLAs represent a simple, low-investment way to create engaging, personalised courses. These activities empower students to explore their own interests in a structured, meaningful way. Recommendations for practice are described.

INTRODUCTION

Active Blended Learning (ABL) is a learner-centred, pedagogical approach that supports the development of subject knowledge and skills. In a course based on ABL principles, learning can take place in formal and informal settings, inside and outside the classroom (University of Northampton, 2020). The purposeful deployment of digital technologies enables focused student interactions with peers, tutors and contents, offering flexibility of time, place and pace. Students often value the blends of synchronous and asynchronous activities, and of individual and group work (Armellini et al., 2021).

The ABL approach has two main dimensions: active and blended. Active learning refers to learning by doing, while reflecting on the process. It highlights the importance of engaging students in more than just listening, encouraging them to use higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, application

and evaluation (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Blended learning is usually described as the combination of web-based and face-to-face provision (e.g., Sener, 2015). However, ABL considers a broader view of the concept, expanding it to incorporate other dimensions in the mix, such as types of activities, level of guidance and forms of assessment. ABL represents a flexible guiding framework for effective pedagogical design and teaching practice (Armellini, 2019).

ABL promotes the focus on students as individuals. It caters to their aspirations, motivations, backgrounds, interests and needs, offering an alternative to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach. It thus fosters personalised learning, a concept with multiple interpretations for practice as it encompasses a diverse range of educational programmes, methods, techniques, activities, designs and technologies (Great Schools Partnership, 2015). In their framework for the personalisation of technology-enhanced learning, FitzGerald and colleagues (2018) list and describe different elements that can be personalised: content, assessment, teaching and learning strategies (e.g., group work or independent learning), learner choices (e.g., resources, topics or mode of study) and teacher choices (e.g., curriculum options or sequences). Other customisable dimensions include learning aims, pace, groups and contexts (Holmes et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2015).

Personalised learning requires enabling a choice on what and how to learn. Offering students this flexibility helps them take responsibility for their own learning, and develop their self-regulation, self-reliance and independence (Great Schools Partnership, 2015; Prain et al., 2013). This process is assumed to be motivating, as learners engage in meaningful activities directly related to their needs and interests (Waldrip et al., 2016). It also fosters academic success and satisfaction (Pardo et al., 2019; Prain et al., 2013). Personalised learning can be enabled through teaching in small groups (Armellini, 2019), but also in large lecture classes (e.g., Godlewska et al., 2019), as long as students' voices are being heard.

Teachers are key to creating personalised learning experiences, as they can devise, enact and evaluate a differentiated curriculum. They can motivate students and discuss their aims, tasks and assessments with them (Prain et al., 2013; Waldrip et al., 2016). They can also adapt their teaching to provide extra support to struggling students and challenge those who have mastered the basics of course content (Holmes et al., 2018).

Strategies to customise learning experiences frequently focus on the use of digital tools, such as adaptive technologies and learning analytics (FitzGerald et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2015). However, there are associated challenges related to the use of technology-enhanced personalised learning, such as the need for equipment or technical infrastructure, high costs, and concerns related to IT security and data privacy (Holmes et al., 2018). Moreover, while there is some evidence of its benefits, research on this topic is still limited (Johnson et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2018; Waldrip et al., 2016).

This chapter focuses on a simple strategy aligned to ABL and personalised learning that can be used with or without digital technologies: Optional Learning Activities (OLAs). The author draws from her experiences teaching at two Mexican universities to characterise OLAs, describe their implementation and discuss their effectiveness to improve students' performance and engagement.

OPTIONAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES (OLAs)

Students often engage in activities that are not required to successfully complete a course. For example, in a virtual learning environment, they might add an avatar to their profile, or display their digital badges. These optional activities correlate with the total participation time in a course and the use of traditional

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