Application of Personal Learning Environment to an Independent Study Experience

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The study applied the concept of personal learning environments to the individualized instruction of a foreign language pre-service teacher in an assessment class. The student was given the opportunity to develop their own personal learning environment by deciding upon specific educational goals, developing lifelong learning resources, and negotiating assessment. The student developed an enthusiasm for the subject matter not seen with other students. However, the situation is unique in that it is an individualized learning situation with a mature, returning student. In the future, attempt will be made to apply the same principles to a whole-class situation.

Keywords: Personal Learning Environments, negotiated assessment, individualized instruction

Introduction

In spite of the recent focus upon progressive pedagogy in education, the focus of traditional university classrooms is typically about the conveying of knowledge. Even if instructors emphasize higher-level thinking in the classroom, instructors often retain tight control over the learning process. While there may be good reasons for maintaining that control, such as institutional requirements for instruction to teach specific content and to demonstrate that students have learned the content, something is lost by not giving more control over the learning process to students - they are not allowed to choose their educational goals, their preferred method of learning, and are not given the opportunity to self-assess their own learning. Because of this, students are not taught to be independent learners. As a result, students may not see the relevance of what they are learning, and may not be motivated to learn.

Background

The recognition of personal learning environments and their application to the classroom provide opportunities to give students greater autonomy in the classroom. Personal learning environments are defined as "all the different tools we use in our everyday life for learning" (Attwell, 2007, p. 4). The development of the concept of personal learning environments has coincided with the development of the Internet and the tools are generally electronic in nature. Specifically, social media has played a central role in personal learning environments (Atwell, 2007). Social media can be used to help students identify and develop networks of people, content, and services which will help inform and extend their learning (Atwell, 2007). The resulting personal learning environment allow students to continue learning beyond the classroom (Atwell, 2007).

Setting and Participant

The following study was done at West Chester University within the teacher preparation program. West Chester University is a public university in southeastern Pennsylvania, consisting of approximately 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students. About of the third of the students are education majors. Most students in the education program are required to take a course in assessment. The focus of the class is upon both classroom and standardized tests, with the emphasis upon using the assessment data to inform instruction. The subject of this study was a student enrolled in foreign language education. The student was taking the class in an independent study format, since she was unable to take it with the regular class. The students was a returning student, and was in her forties.

Methodology

While the assessment class in question is typically taught using group activities, much of the conveyance of the material had been done using lecture. As with most classrooms, the instruction had been done in a controlled learning environment, in which all students follow the same routine. There has been little or no choice of content, instructional methods; or assessment. However, for this independent study, the student was allowed to develop her own personal learning environment. The student was asked to keep two blogs. One blog documented the content of learning, with, the expectations for the blog were very open – the onus was upon the student to demonstrate learning. This approach reflects the concept of heutagogy, which allows for negotiated assessments, and which empowers the student in her learning (Blaschke, 2013). Additionally, the student was to keep a blog with reflections upon the process of learning. In this blog, the students was to document the process of creating her personal learning environment. The use of a blog as a social media tool to document learning and reflection with a personal learning environment is documented in Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012).

The expectations for general content of the course to be addressed was conveyed to the student at the beginning of the class. This included classroom assessment, standardized testing, performance assessments, as well as portfolio assessment. However, how the student was to address these content areas was left up to the student. To do this, she was to research the assessment needs within her profession, foreign language education, with regards to the specific types of assessments within those general categories, and to issues which were important with regards to those assessments. Thus, the student was being asked to take control over and responsibility for the content of instruction.

In addition, the student was expected to start developing a network which would extend beyond the classroom. And finally, the student was to start identifying and become familiar with important assessment resources in her content area. In this way, the student was start to obtain a broader perspective on assessment foreign language education.

Results

Initially, the student struggled with the technological issues of setting up the blog. Given the independent nature of the instruction, the student did not get into the content as quickly as the instructor had expected. However, after a few meetings with the professor, and with help from the student's son, the initial issues were resolved, and the student began to enthusiastically delve into the subject matter. Indeed, the difference in the student's attitude compared with the attitude of students in the traditional classroom was remarkable. The student ended up exceeding the requirements of the class. An example of this is that while attending a conference on foreign language education and, during the conference, she focused her attention upon assessment topics at the conference– something she admitted she would not have done without the class.

Conclusions

Overall, the experiment worked very well. The student was an enthusiastic participant in the educational experience. The results, however, need to be interpreted cautiously. The student who was taught was a returning student who was a responsible adult with interest in furthering her education. The one-on-one instruction makes it easier to implement such an innovative approach. It is therefore not clear how easily it would be to use the same method with whole-group instruction. But the results are tantalizing enough to make the instructor want to try to attempt such instruction in a whole-class setting. Possible ways this might happen include using a more project-based approach, which could provide both structure and freedom for students to learn and demonstrate their learning. Students would have to organize their own learning and identify the resources needed to address the project. If this were done in groups, it would allow students to give them the opportunity to explore the resources together, so as to help one another develop their own learning environments.

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