

Editorial (Special Edition)

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Within a turbulent higher education sector globally, the University of Northampton is undergoing dramatic change. The Waterside campus, with a smaller footprint than the combination of Park and Avenue and with no lecture theatres, will open in the heart of the town in 2018. A deliberate focus on social impact for community benefit, coupled with a culture shift towards innovative, student-centred forms of blended and technology-enhanced learning, are some of the major contributors to our four critical success factors: student experience, intellectual capital, strategic alliances and financial sustainability. Programme redesign and capability development for staff are taking place now. In the form of short, funded pedagogic research projects, the University offers opportunities for staff to take pedagogic risks and evaluate their innovations.

This issue of ELEHE reports on three of those experiences, all focusing on different aspects of pedagogical change and digital transformation, in the traditional classroom and online. It highlights key opportunities and challenges in learning and teaching as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st Century. These papers offer an illustration of how different groups of colleagues, in different roles, have shifted away from the norm by piloting and evaluating new ideas in their pursuit of learner benefit.

McCormack and Hanley-Smith report on the changes implemented to the MA History in the 2013-14 academic year. The programme had previously been taught in a face-to-face format, with seminars and lectures taking place primarily in the evenings. The re-design of the programme saw modules being run flexibly, with a combination of face-to-face and active online learning elements. The NILE virtual learning environment (VLE) was the main technology used in the blended learning approach. The flexibility afforded by this design impacted on the new assessment strategy, which included a range of formative and summative components at different stages of each module. Despite the small size of the student sample in this study, a number of benefits for full and part-time students were identified. Each component of the “blend” (face-to-face activity and focused, asynchronous online work) had advantages and disadvantages, which this paper explores in detail. The analysis refers to the development of both skills and subject knowledge in History. This blended learning experience has been a successful one for students and staff. The authors suggest possible ways in which appropriate blends can be “finessed” to maximise benefit.

The second article takes us beyond the comfort zone of the VLE. Preece reports on the introduction of social media as a platform for blended learning in a face-to-face Dance module. The module was designed to introduce students to the analysis of dance and choreographic work. Lectures, seminars, workshops and studio-based work were all part of the learning and teaching approach. The study used Padlet as a tool in conjunction with the VLE. The visual nature of Padlet enabled the tutor-researcher to set up highly engaging and successful collaborative tasks that were fully integrated into the 2012-13 iteration of the module. This design would be difficult or impossible to implement on the VLE alone. The paper concludes with a number of questions that do not focus on the social media tools themselves, but on how we can use them to construct viable and engaging blended learning scenarios for today’s students.

In the final article, Dimmock and House report on a piece of research conducted on the video resources hosted in University of Northampton’s virtual Skills Hub

(<http://skillshub.northampton.ac.uk/>). The Skills Hub is a Wordpress-based website designed to support students across a range of study skills. All resources have been uploaded under an open licence by staff in Northampton's Library and Learning Services (LLS). Informed by current literature on the design and development of multimedia resources for learning, this article reports the findings of an empirical study conducted to evaluate the study skills videos through feedback from a wide range of users in a university setting. The feedback was analysed to make recommendations about the quality of open educational resources (OERs) with implications for the future production of resources by LLS and beyond. Technical and presentational aspects of the production, the structure of each OER and the quality of the content, emerged as the key areas that impact on the effectiveness (in terms of user comprehension, concentration information recall and 'professional look' of digital resources) of video-based OERs. The paper also proposes a useful and detailed scheme for staff training that takes account of the research findings.

Pedagogic innovation and digital transformation are central to the University of Northampton's achievements and success over the next few years. The Waterside campus constitutes an additional driver to make positive -and often radical- change happen in the University. However, the shift to creative and appropriate blends of face-to-face and online learning needs to occur and is currently unfolding, with or without the new campus on the horizon. The three papers in this issue of ELEHE exemplify these developments.

At Northampton, blended learning is not something we do in addition to our normal teaching; it *is* our normal teaching method. Course teams and individuals in all Schools have been engaging in various forms of student-centred blended learning within their practice for a long time, including a number of examples of highly innovative and sustainable approaches. I am excited by these developments and how they can enhance the student experience at Northampton. We will not become an online university. We will, however, capitalise on the benefits of flexible, blended and technology-enhanced learning, for our staff and students.

I hope you enjoy this issue of ELEHE. The editors look forward to receiving contributions for future editions: research reports (3000-6000 words), critical case studies (3000-4000 words), research work in progress (up to 2000 words) and book reviews (500 -1000 words). All contributions should reflect the aims and scope of the journal. More information about the journal, including authors' guidelines, can be found on the journal website (www.northampton.ac.uk/elehe). We also encourage you to explore the ELEHE blog (<http://elehe.blogspot.co.uk/>).

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