Developing a cost-effective approach to the evaluation and improvement of teaching and learning by making greater use of student feedback

Luton Sixth Form College

Project synopsis

The two Colleges have investigated methods of collecting quality feedback from students that can help teachers and managers to assess the quality of teaching and learning without relying solely on formal lesson observation. Both Colleges have been able to make improvements to their use of learner feedback and both have made use of new technology to achieve this.

Project aims

Luton Sixth Form College and Palmer's College are two outstanding Sixth Form Colleges which seek to develop methods of evaluating teaching and learning that improve on the traditional approaches. The aims will be to evaluate teaching and learning primarily from the perspective of the learners and so removing the need for comprehensive formal lesson observations to take place, thus saving resources.

Delivery (Progress against 'project methodology')

Planning and monitoring meetings.

Several meetings between the Vice Principals of the two Colleges have taken place throughout the year to coordinate planning and research and share findings. In addition there have been many exchanges by e mail.

Appointment of researchers.

LSFC appointed a researcher in December 2010. This was a 12 month appointment. He has a role to research different methods of assessing teaching and learning. He has not visited any other institutions yet but has done some useful research and development in the College in the area of developing student feedback on lessons through the use of surveys. He is part of an LSIS project group at the College that meets regularly and consists of approximately 10 members.

Palmer's appointed two researchers at the end of December 2010. This appointment is until the end of August 2011. In reviewing the aims of the project the researchers at Palmer's divided their roles to allow for one to focus on the technological aspects and the other to evaluate other methods for direct and managed learner feedback. The main focus initially was secondary research, investigating methodologies, technologies and other institutional approaches. Several visits were undertaken to Sussex Coast College, The BETT Show and as well as telephone and electronic discussions with Hills Road Sixth Form College. The aim was to consolidate this work by piloting several approaches to evaluation in the summer term, specifically piloting mobile

technology with specific student cohorts, on-line surveys, again with selected pilot groups, utilising the tutorial system for focus groups and more specific small group feedback. A broader approach is also to be trialed with a 'comments box' scheme. On completion of pilot stages and evaluation process the routes with the most potential will be applied to larger student cohorts and across College in association with Palmer's development of The Learner Voice Strategy.

Investigating the use of technology for improved feedback.
LSFC - there have been a number of successful trials using 'survey monkey' to develop higher quality and useful student feedback.

Palmer's – Technology as a tool for improved feedback.

Overview
The approach to using technology to improving learner feedback was two-fold:
- An extensive review of the technologies available
- The costing implications and usability/institute experience and experiential work proposed by the research findings and piloted with future implementation across the institute.

Much of the work undertaken was based on a substantial amount of academic secondary research undertaken by the researcher responsible, looking both at available technologies and the application of them in education. In support of this the researcher attended several research methodologies days run by SRA/RM, to assess best practice/processes in collating data and evaluation findings, the LSIS Learning Fair East and East Midlands; she also attended a LSIS Coaching Skills workshop and joined the Coaching Skills Network.

In association with the academic research the assessment of available technologies was facilitated by BETT 2011 which allowed for the review of current and forthcoming technologies in education and beyond and to initiate contacts with technology providers both hard and soft; this provided several very useful contacts in relation to mobile technologies which formed part of the final pilot study proposal.

Contact was made with several academic institutions to assess their experience of the application of technology in accessing the Learner Voice and a visit made to Sussex Coast College, this was especially useful in assessing technology and the Learner Voice as they had piloted a number of technologies that had been suggested by the research, as well as giving insight into technology and data collation. A full report on this visit was produced and attached as appendices (Sussex Coast Report). Additionally, the researcher met with several technology providers (Albion computers, Solutions Inc and Apple Lakeside (Business) and ASUS) specifically reviewing Apple based mobile technology and attended Apple training events and fostered some useful academic and business contacts. ASUS products were assessed as the PC based alternative to Apple products, because of their focus on the entry-level educational technology, specifically netbooks and their new mobile tablet PC. The aim being to access the flexibility and cost alternatives offered.

Further visits to ESSA Academy in Bolton who utilise Mac mobile technology extensively and potentially Winchester are also proposed. However, the ready availability of reports on the ESSA Academy meant that a visit was of less tangible use and the usage of technology at Winchester was, on further research, less applicable to this projects' research parameters.

The result of research into mobile technology resulted in the proposal to pilot an iPod mobile lab to assess its viability in accessing the Learner Voice and as a means to evaluate teaching and learning experience. The rationale behind the proposal was the inherent flexibility provided by the iPod, coupled with the low cost. It is highly mobile and dependant on pilot findings created a potential teaching and learning tool as well as a portal for data. Furthermore, this leads the research question into prospective implementation of student's mobile technology in the classroom challenging the prevalent censure of smart technology in education.

The mobile lab was competitively priced and 1 iPod has been purchased to beta test survey apps etc as well as an Apple developer license to explore potential for bespoke and off the shelf evaluation methods. The meetings with Sussex Coast College were beneficial with regards to software applications as they were able to feedback on their findings regards of the shelf applications, specifically Survey Monkey and some of the limitations they experienced. Two on line survey providers used were Survey Monkey and Surveyor. An application with a specific interface for Mac mobile technologies were further investigated and draft surveys designed for both applications to test with pilot groups.

Having identified the technology, a test group (a small cohort of 19 students studying the advanced diploma in Creative Media) was identified to pilot the scheme. Working with the Curriculum Manager a core set of 10 questions were designed to access student satisfaction levels on the programme and also prompt initial self assessment.(A draft on this is available in the appendices.)

The College is also developing its Intranet to incorporate Moodle. As part of the project Palmer's is investigating additional methods for student feedback, linking in with mobile technology as well as potentially utilising links, pop ups, etc. This will form part of the expansion of the pilot in the new academic year with survey and feedback opportunities posted on both course pages and College home page.

Outcomes

The research aspect of the project was extremely meaningful in accessing a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of technology for improved feedback. Although extensive and time consuming, it allowed for clear evaluation without lengthy or costly piloting, rather it allowed for a focused proposal to be developed which not only offers a flexible approach to data collation, but also reflect the needs of students both in allowing for feedback and mirrors their technological sophistication; students in the16-19 bracket are digital natives and the technology involved in the pilot anecdotally a preferred method of communication. Students preferred the technology as the portal for data gathering rather than traditional paper based methods and it should be considered in the long term. However, whether this represents a novelty factor a much longer-term application with a broader cohort is required before validity is proven.

Practical Problems

The main issue regards practical application of the research with time limitations. The full evaluation of potential technologies, beta testing of both hardware and software, coupled with the work undertaken researching other educational institution's experience, meant that practical application has been to date limited to small cohort responses and focus group feedback on the technology. This does not currently give a breadth of data to provide conclusive response to the question.

Further developments

The pilot results, although limited, gave authority to the potential for the technology and a full mobile Mac lab, containing 20 iPods, iPad interface and software has been purchased and will be tested in a much fuller capacity in the new academic year.

The proposal is to:

- Further develop the survey and present to students via both Survey Monkey and Surveyor to access the usability of the 2 interfaces
- Broaden the test group to a much larger cohort of vocational Business students to allow for greater credibility in data. The media cohort, although useful in assessing the technology, was too small to give credible sample response and did not allow for extrapolation of data to reflect research population
- To further greater breadth, the study needs a longitudinal approach to test the results for extraneous variables. Student experiences, and therefore their responses to evaluative surveys, are affected by a number of variables such as transition between levels and institutions, exams etc, in order to gain a clear and valid response to their experience. The data needs to be collated over at least 1 academic year and preferably 2 before real conclusions can be drawn
- Alongside the testing of data there is a need for a longitudinal approach to testing the portal for accessing the data and therefore the future developments mean testing two pathways for data collation, via mobile Mac technology and via College Intranet, the rationale being to access which route provides greater student response rate, most timeliness and usability of technology. Moreover, the longevity of the technological needs to be assessed both in terms of physical robustness and technological life span

The long-term proposal is therefore to test the technology and the data over a 1 year period, review and then repeat.

Training students.

At LSFC there has been a pilot which involved a student taking part in the observation of a lesson and jointly feeding back to the teacher concerned. It is expected that further data will be gathered by the researcher who will investigate schools and Colleges where student observers are used. At the same time he is piloting an alternative model where individual students work with their teacher as a "learning partner". Early indications show that this could be a more effective improvement model although it won't help to achieve the objective of removing the need for formal observations.

Reflective learning

During the A2 'transition' period Palmer's piloted a scheme across three departments within the Humanities Faculty of using lesson reflection sheets (See appendix A) with small groups of A level student volunteers. The students have recorded weekly 'diaries' of their learning experiences which have then been discussed. The teachers then individually and collectively evaluated the scheme with a view to seeing whether it should be developed further as part of the College's Learner Voice Strategy for 2011/2012.

Evaluation: Main conclusions:

Educational validity
- Everyone felt it had been worthwhile and should be further developed.
- Critical feedback from students was relatively modest possibly because of the excellence of the teaching but also perhaps because students needed more encouragement to be as openly critical as they would like (as long as it is constructive)
- It was felt to be much more revealing than the current College Student Satisfaction Survey because it addressed the specifics of classroom learning
- It was seen as a two way process in that it encouraged students to reflect on how their own learning styles and preferences
- It was pleasing and reassuring to receive so much positive feedback from students

Practical Problems
- Students were asked to complete the forms either during the lesson, or at the end of the lesson, or at home to be handed in the next lesson
- The last option (taking them away) proved least effective as students forgot to complete the form or failed to submit it in the next lesson
- Transition proved problematic due to the lack of lesson continuity (because of external events such as the HE Fair, etc.
- It was felt the language on the form could be made more user friendly and simpler to understand

Further Development
- The form has been modified to make it simpler for students
- A larger cohort of teachers should be involved in a second pilot programme, involving whole departments, possibly as part of the Curriculum Area Review process (to be initially discussed with Heads of Faculty)
- The students selected need to be properly briefed to ensure they provide the most helpful responses. A whole class response could be sought but this might prove to be too burdensome for teachers to analyse.
- Participating teachers should attempt to get feedback which reflects as wide a range of diversity of learning activities as possible (assuming the teacher does vary how they teach!) with the aim of reaching a target quota of lesson reflection sheets completed
- It should be applied early on in the first term (close to the October half term) as a tool to evaluate classroom teaching and learning, possibly supplementing the student satisfaction survey and then towards the end of the course (March- April) in order to evaluate any changes in student perceptions.
- It could provide useful material for inclusion within teachers' professional reviews
- Develop the Curriculum Area Review pilot further, where a team of observers drop into an identified area, conduct observations, focus group meeting with staff and students and look at student work. Resulting in a summary report and linked action plan. The pilot demonstrated improved success rates in all areas

Progress against expected outcomes

To replace a formal lesson observation scheme with a variety of methods of assessing the quality of teaching learning.

There is real progress being made on this objective. In addition to the work being done on developing student input, at LSFC one department is trialing a system of monitoring which involves the teacher collecting a "portfolio" of evidence that includes peer observations, observations of teachers in other departments, exam results and student feedback in addition to the formal observation record.

To develop methods of assessing the quality and impact of the learning process by focusing largely on outcomes for learners.

Most of the work that is being done is focused on ways of increasing student input into the evaluation and improvement of teaching and learning.

To develop more cost-effective approach to monitoring teaching and learning than that which is currently in use in both Colleges.

It is not clear yet that there will be significant scope for saving costs. This will only become possible if it is possible to develop a model that can replace the majority of formal observation. On the other hand, it does seem likely that the work will lead to greater cost-effectiveness in that it will mean that judgements about quality will be more reliable than when based solely on formal teacher observation. All departments at LSFC are currently using Survey Monkey and are trialling the use of students as learning partners.

Sharing of findings.

Both Colleges belong to a network of six Sixth Form Colleges. It is anticipated that the project findings will be shared with the other Colleges in the summer of 2012 when both have had an opportunity to pilot some of the new ideas.