REAP Project Funding Proposal & Plan

University of Strathclyde

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TITLE

"Weblogs in the 1st year of the Management Development Programme: Nature and patterns of student use of Blogs with particular reference to project work and related reflective practice"

AIM

To investigate the enhancement of student reflection and self-regulation using a class weblog, with particular reference to insights from a major assessed team assignment ('The Holiday Project') in relation to an assessed individual Learning Diary activity.

RATIONALE

MDP is a mature and innovative programme, which prizes student business skills and personal development for employability.

This compulsory 3 year programme for all business students involving 500 students each year has been running since 1999. Active and problem based learning is the approach and students work in interdisciplinary teams. We work collaboratively with a range of employers including Proctor and Gamble, Accenture and Deloitte. (see Appendix 1 for full description of MDP).

Student reflection is seen as a key learning outcome to enhance employability which can be enhanced, and which is strongly related to:

- Current thinking in UK business education (Hawkridge , 2005)

- Employability & assessment of learning (Knight & Yorke, 2003)

- Enhancement of student learning in HE (Boud and others , 1995/6)

- Student career preparation (Mayrhofer et al, 2005)

NOTE: Current work on reflection includes seeking student views see Appendix 4.

A number of interrelated strategies feature in the MDP design are relevant to the proposed project:

- Students work in interdisciplinary teams and engage with major projects as key learning and assessment experiences.

- In-house VLE (MERCURY) which introduced a bloging feature and shared space for teams in Session 2006/7.

- Formal use of a Learning Diary (LD) assignment to encourage reflection.

MDP has developed through a form of educational practice which engages staff in analysing current practice with a view to improvement and innovation (Johnston and Watson, 2004; 2006). A small REAP project would be in line with our established practice for ongoing curriculum enhancement.

The main driver for choosing the blog as a unit of innovation is a desire to explore how this feature can be implemented as a possible tool for use by the students for all team working across all years and how it can be related to existing student reflective practices such as the1st year LD.

The outcomes of a small REAP project may provide valuable information for future development of the course design, and review of staff teaching and assessment practice, based on a deeper appreciation of student engagement with the Weblog as a tool for managing projects and encouraging reflection.

METHODS

- Comparative analysis of Blog use in the MDP over both semesters, Session 2006/7 (In-house VLE can provide the historical data on use frequencies etc. for analysis).

- A pilot study of one group (approx. 50 students) comprising 8 student teams during the 'Holiday Project' in second semester.

- A survey of student Learning Diaries to identify references to Blog use, with particular reference to the pilot group's diaries. A follow-up survey of all MDP1 students regarding blog use and a reflective note (250/300 words) from all MDP 1 students on blog use in relation to the Holiday Project.

- Synthesis of findings to illuminate future use of the Blog feature to enhance student learning.

Research will comprise:

- Quantitative study of patterns of Blog use over two semesters to establish patterns of use/non-use, relationship to development of team management skills, with particular emphasis on the 2nd semester Holiday Project milestones.

- Qualitative study of the nature of use in terms of categories (e.g. communications about practical arrangements; nature of dynamics within groups; application to the Holiday Project) using a combination of focus groups and close reading of

LDs by AW/BJ (may be possible to apply NUDIST/INVIVO or other suitable software to LDs).

- An Intervention with the pilot group to explore student concepts and experiences of using the blog as a combined project management and reflective tool. The aim is to identify the potential for defining more exact conditions of use, which can be rolled out in Session 2007/8. This will include supplying students with categories to assist bloging. Candidate categories will be supplied and their use monitored and discussed in review meetings with students.

Candidate categories to be explored:

- Team structures, such as cohesion and decision-making in relation to: evaluation of the project brief; planning and monitoring progress; leadership; team roles; division of labour; work distribution; activity management, help-seeking and problem-solving.

- Operational factors and constraints such as: time management; information seeking, analysis and use; weblog functionality; alternatives to bloging; relationships with tutors.

- Reflective practices such as: discussion of improvements to practice; making connections to the Learning diary and MDP course aims and assessments, with particular reference to Employability.

Given that the weblog facility was introduced in Session 2006/7, we do not have a baseline of experience from a previous project. However we will analyse usage statistics during 2006/7 to establish current patterns of use within the whole class, which can be related to observations about the pilot group experience.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

In the MDP students work in groups of approx. 40/50 which are organised in continuing teams of approx. 5/6 students with a lecturer/tutor staff combination for each group. A pattern of activity including weekly 2 hour group sessions, labs, group projects and presentations constitutes the main features of the learning design. This contrasts with more familiar lecture/tutorial/assignment/exam design used for large first year classes.

The timelines for the Group Sessions over Semesters 1/2 (S1/2) are:

- S1 Weeks 2-4: Group Work Skills and Introduction to Reflection

- Semester 1 Week 4/5 - students introduced to weblog space and told about file uploading for sharing and blog. Told they could use it for their project work

- S1 week 5-10 Super Casino Project; end of semester 1 - data on weblog use and file upload use.

- S1 weeks 11/12 Work of Reflection; beginning of semester 2: Learning Diaries submitted

- S2 Weeks 1-3/4 Forecasting Project

- S2 Weeks 4-12 **Holiday Project** - Students in study group given specific instructions about the use of weblogs in weeks 5/6

Lab sessions are parallel and feed into the group work at various stages

- S1Wk2-3 Basic IT Skills

- S1 Wk4-11 S2 WK 2-5 Self Learning of Excel through STAMS VLE

- S2 WK6/7 Finance spreadsheets

During the second semester, the major assessed task for each student team is to undertake the **'Holiday Project'**, for which a written report and an oral presentation with power point slide show is required.   During the course of the project a number of weekly 'milestone' presentations are required.   The Learning Diary is submitted for feedback and marking during second semester (the Learning diary has already been submitted at the start of semester two, students will be submitting an element of individual reflection on team working on completion of the Holiday Project).

NOTE: see appendices 2/3 for full details of the Holiday Project and the Learning Diary.

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APPENDICES

1. Brief description of MDP1.

2. Holiday Project brief & assessment criteria.

3. Learning diary template

4. MDP & Reflection: Student Views

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