Strategies of effective e-learners

Aim

This activity is designed to help participants understand that learners develop their own strategies for learning with technology, that these strategies can be educationally beneficial, and that institutions and course teams can support learners to develop more effective and educationally beneficial strategies for learning.

Preparation

Print out the two pages of 'strategies' on stiff paper or card and cut out each element to create sets of 13 strategy cards.

Put one set of cards on each table at the start of the exercise. Having one set for a number of pairs can force discussions about which strategies are most important (it's fine for more than one pair at a table to adopt the same strategy for the exercise)

Alternatively provide one set per pair, but this limits discussion and obviously increases printing costs.

Prepare two/three powerpoint slides with the 'instructions to participants', or print on a hand-out to include with the strategy cards.

Setting the scene

Before carrying out this activity participants might have:

- Reflected on their own skills and strategies for e-learning
- Listened to learners talking about their approaches to learning with technology
- Accessed some learners' strategies from the LexDis database

Instructions to participants

1. In pairs select three or four strategies of effective e-learners that seem important to you
   - For example because you know they are being used by learners in your context
   - Or because you think they would particularly benefit learners in your context
   - Or because you find them interesting for other reasons

2. For each strategy consider:
   a. What are the educational benefits of this strategy?
   b. How could you (practitioners, course teams, central service teams) support this strategy better?

You might consider issues like: assessment, use of personal technologies, flexibility and choice, recognising learner skills, supporting collaboration, supporting less-skilled learners

3. (If time) go on to consider
   a. Are there any downsides to this strategy?
   b. What solutions or alternatives could you offer?

Points for feeding back and discussion (powerpoint slide or verbally)

- How useful was the exercise?
- Were you surprised by any of these strategies? Are there any other strategies you expected to see reflected here?
- What were the most significant changes to current practice you proposed?

Follow my tutor

Learners research their tutor's own academic practices and interests, e.g. following their blog, looking up their publications, using reading lists and lecture materials to create web search terms and comparing with other materials available (which the tutor might also have 'used for inspiration'!)

Multi-tasking

Most learners, not limited to the younger age-group, engage in multi-tasking when they use computers to support their learning. The length of time spent engaging in any one task (or 'window') may be short, and a learning session may involve many different sub-tasks alongside 'distraction' activities (music, skype, email, Facebook, msn). Many learners are also adept at using multiple technologies in multiple locations.

Bricolage or patch writing

Learners piece assignments together from a large number of sources, some of which may be existing work of that learner while others have been downloaded or borrowed from a friend. Strategic learners will write over and rework these pieces to fit them for their new context, and incidentally also to hide the fact of their being borrowed.

Thinking aloud

Students with experience of blogging or maintaining their own web pages may use these to reflect on learning. Other learners are using digital photos, video and social software snippets to support reflection. The public nature of blogs and possibilities for sharing e-portfolios make these strategies subtly different from traditional learning logs.

Triangulation

Some learners are sophisticated users of the Internet. They will use Google or wikipedia as a starting point for research, but be selective about the hits they investigate further. They recognise resources with an academic provenance, and will triangulate different results to build a more credible picture. Some learners are also adept at using online journals, Google scholar, and collections of teaching resources.

My technologies my self

Many learners use wireless and mobile devices (mobile phones, ipods, communication technologies, social software and online information services to help fit learning into their lives. While most see the benefit of institutional technologies such as VLEs, they would prefer to be able to use their personal technologies in institutional contexts.

Digital creatives

Learners with experience of creating web content, editing photos or video, editing digital music files or being creative with digital software will want to use those skills to enhance their coursework, particularly presentations.

Our Space

Learners set up their own 'spaces' for discussion and communication about coursework, invisible from their tutor and the institution.
'so it looks on the face of it from the university website that we haven't been communicating all year but we have, it's just outside of that [discussion] board'.

My blend

Some learners are effectively blending formal and informal, online and traditional, collaborative and individual learning to support their own goals. They emphasise the need to keep a balance and not to over-rely on any one medium or mode of learning.

Agile adopters

Disabled students in particular are adept at identifying solutions and work-arounds for software issues. They may well have explored customisation options and other non-standard functions of software before their peers or tutors.

Sharing the load

Learners will share out assignment work and pool resources, often using technology to share files and communicate with their share group. Some learners 'take turns' attending lectures or seminars, discretely recording events to share with others later.

Phone a friend

Some learners are skilled in sharing content and using social networks to identify others with similar interests or complementary expertise. A small number engage in social bookmarking and reviewing. These social networks can be very valuable in support of learning.

Pioneers

Some learners experiment with new software and services. They are often the first to upgrade to new versions, and they keep up-to-date through online reviews and networks. Pioneers can provide valuable support to others if encouraged to share, and learn even more by doing so.

Multi-media literacy

Learners who have good creative and critical skills with images and video can now use these as starting points for finding and evaluating academic content. Gamers learn rapidly through engagement with virtual worlds and simulations.