

On-Line Learning In Line with Student Feedback

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Introduction

On-line learning and Computer Assisted Language Learning are becoming more popular as our students become more technologically savvy, the Internet becomes more reliable and institutions realize the potential for 'non-traditional' teaching via the web. BUSEL is no different. In the fall of the 2006-07 school year, Virtual Campus (VC) was launched as a platform for students to get extra English language instruction outside of class. As classroom instructors at BUSEL, we wanted to look into ways of using VC more effectively with our students and so we devised a questionnaire cycle to collect data about how the students were using VC, what features of VC were being utilized and what suggestions our students had for improving the delivery and use of VC.

Our Context

Virtual Campus is a Learner Management System (LMS) designed by Meteksan exclusively for Bilkent University. It allows instructors and students to interact via the web in on-line 'classrooms'. The features provided for use are:

- Home Page: Here instructors can post welcome messages and general information about the course.
- Syllabus: Here the students can view important dates for the course (i.e. exams, projects, holidays), weekly self-study suggestions and coursebooks.
- Resources: On this page there are hyperlinked teacher-prepared study documents or web-site links for students to further practice the skills/language of the course.

- Assignments: This interactive page allows students to complete assignments, such as quizzes, and get an answer key immediately. Most instructors post grammar/vocabulary revision exercises here.
- Conferences: This functions like a typical on-line forum.
- Web-Quest: This is the portal for students to access materials and resources for their course's project. These projects have several steps involving reading articles, listening to interviews/lectures, watching a film/documentary, writing an essay, giving an oral presentation, and/or preparing for and participating in a debate.

While all these functions were available we found that, at first, most instructors were only using 'Web-quest' and 'Resources'. We felt that with so many options, we could make better use of VC but we were not sure where to invest our time for the greatest reward. That is what lead us to designing a student questionnaire to find out how we could further improve VC.

Questionnaire Cycles

Once we had decided to gather data, we started by researching how to design questionnaires for use in the language classroom. Our main goal in conducting the questionnaire cycles was to find out what functions of VC the students were using, which functions they enjoyed using, which functions they felt were unnecessary and finally, our students' reaction to this new teaching method.

To achieve this aim, we designed two questionnaires, one for low-level students and one for high-level. The low-level questionnaire was given in the students' native language (Turkish) in order to get reliable data. However, for the higher-level students, we felt the data wouldn't be affected by conducting the questionnaire in English and that the questionnaire could also serve as a language-teaching tool. Additionally, the questionnaire for the lower-level students took into account that this was their first course using VC, whereas the higher-level students had all used VC in previous courses.

While some of the questions and the language used were different, the spirit of the two questionnaires was similar. Both questionnaires used multiple-choice questions to gather data about how often, where and which functions of VC the students used mostly. Both questionnaires also used a descriptive Likert-scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree) to gather

data regarding the students' attitude towards using VC and finally, both questionnaires included two open-ended questions for the students to give further details and offer suggestions.

The results of the questionnaires showed us that students overwhelmingly had a positive attitude towards using VC. One feature of VC that students particularly enjoyed was sending e-mails to their teachers via the message function. Another unexpected result was the students' awareness of how their technical skills increased as a result of using VC. This was an unintentional by-product of VC but appreciated nonetheless.

Based on the questionnaire results, we made additions and changes to VC in the next courses. We included more listening activities since students had responded positively to those offered. We included more specific web-links that would take the students directly to the desired page rather than a web-site's homepage. We devoted more class time to using VC and training our students on how to better use the functions. Finally, we stopped using the 'Conferences' feature since students (and instructors) found it difficult to use.

We implemented these changes over two courses, while developing more materials and widening the range of activities available to students. Once we felt that enough time had passed for the new changes to take effect, we decided to give our questionnaires again.

For the second questionnaire, many of the results were similar. The students continued to enjoy using VC and used it for the same amount of time as before. Students also commented that they appreciated communicating with their instructors. However, we found that students were more aware of the different features, how they functioned and how they could be better utilized. In the first questionnaire students typically limited their responses to 'good' or 'no changes needed'. In the second questionnaire, students elaborated by saying 'good but more listening' or 'could you add speaking?'. Part of the reason for the change is that in the second questionnaire cycle the students were more accustomed to using VC and could see the deficiencies.

Based on the results of the second questionnaire, we have again planned changes and revisions to our use and delivery of VC. We plan to add more listening since the students have responded well to this. We plan to add more writing instruction and feedback sessions,

especially at the lower levels. Again, students are recognizing that this platform can serve them for more than simply filling in gaps in a grammar exercise. We plan to include more interactive activities like puzzles and games. We also plan on introducing pronunciation work through the use of on-line recording software such as 'Audacity'.

Conclusion

There were several positive outcomes as a result of this mini-research project. We discovered that since VC is primarily a resource for students' self-study, without their input, we would only be guessing at their needs and preferences. We also found that by using the data we collected from the questionnaires, we were able to save time when developing activities and materials to put on VC since we were developing those materials in-line with their feedback. Finally, we found that this process of using questionnaires is easy and effective for getting feedback from students and that it can be used to evaluate any number of classroom changes or additions.