Supporting the development of academic study skills using access-restricted online tasks

University of Glasgow
School of Education

Elizabeth Black, School of Education, University of Glasgow
Elizabeth.Black.2@glasgow.ac.uk

Context

BA Childhood Practice
- A management level, practice-based qualification meeting professional standards for leadership

Childhood practitioners
- Working in non-compulsory services for children and young people aged 0 – 18
- Leaders or aspiring leaders

Non-traditional students
- All over 21, and often significantly older
- Previous vocational, rather than academic qualifications
- At least 4 years post-qualifying experience
- Studying part-time while in work

Key Issues and Debates A and B

Development of a new two-part course, combining elements of three pre-existing courses with a substantial academic study skills element. Each part of the course spans an academic year.

Across the BA CP programme, academic skills are embedded and students prepare self-study tasks in advance of attending monthly full-day classes based around discussion and group work.

In KID, tasks are only available on Moodle and access is restricted until the previous activity has been completed – a more blended approach (Spadafora and Marini, 2018:1).

Rationale

To support students to take a deep rather than strategic approach to learning (Richardson, 2005) – particularly given the work, family and other demands placed on all these students.

To support students in pacing their learning through the year and avoid students becoming overwhelmed by facing all the tasks for a whole course at once.

Evaluating the approach

A questionnaire was designed asking students to rate online activities against a semantic differential scale, followed by an open-ended stop-start-continue section with space to provide reasons. Three groups of students were invited to participate:

Cohort A
The first cohort to complete part one of the course (KID A 2017-18)
Paper questionnaire completed in the final class
21 out of a possible 22 students responded

Cohort B
Students progressing to the second part of the course in their final year (KID B 2018-19)
Online questionnaire link distributed after the final class, due to time constraints
8 out of a possible 30 students responded

Cohort C
Second cohort of students to complete the first part of the course (KID A 2018-19)
Paper questionnaire distributed in the final class
41 out of a possible 43 students responded

How helpful did you find the restricted-access format?

Legend: 1 - Not useful, 2, 3, 4, 5 - Very useful
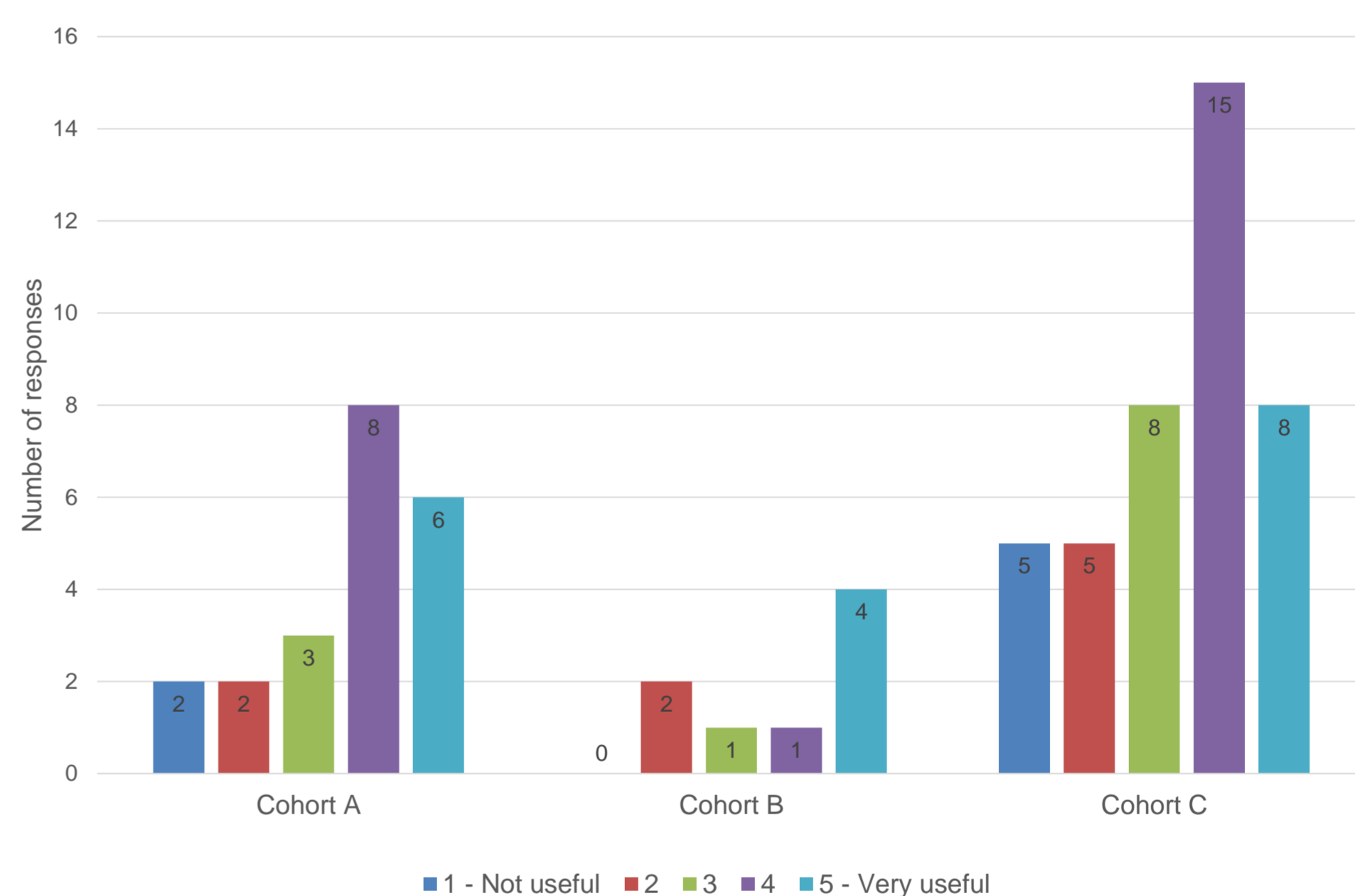
A successful innovation… but…

Keating et al. (2009) found that some students simply disliked particular activities when asked to engage with them, and this was echoed by a range of comments from participants in this study.

Several students raised issues relating to ways in which their time management had been made harder by the restricted-access format. Kim et al. (2017) also found a form of restricted access effective, noting higher concentration even while students resented having their freedom restricted.

> It was a great way to track work and gave me motivation to keep working through them! (Respondent C-13)

> I found this [restricted access] useful to ensure I was engaging in all activities (Respondent A-15)

> [Restricted-access format] stops you from scanning info. Good to have start/stop, works like bookmark in your time. (Respondent C-26)

> Stops you from completing shorter tasks earlier – more flexibility to fit into working life. (Respondent A-4)

> As a student who did engage with the activities, I did find the process frustrating. (Respondent B-6)

> Changing the order of tasks, some important tasks were the last ones to 'unlock'. (Respondent C-41)

BA CP students have reported taking strategic approaches including prioritising certain activities such as those that will be discussed in class.

Comments recorded by participants indicated that a restricted access format increases student engagement with online self-study tasks and that some students understand the constraint as supportive to their learning.

> How do we maintain a balance between **guiding students towards deeper learning by restricting tasks** on the one hand and **limiting the flexibility of learners (particularly mature students) to prioritise and own their learning** on the other?