

Developing the Guided Learner Journey

Mr Paul Hudson

User Experience Development Manager, University of Hertfordshire

Dr Helen Barefoot

Deputy Director of the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre, University of Hertfordshire

ABSTRACT: The University of Hertfordshire was one of the first UK universities to embrace the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and embed it as part of our learning strategy to personalise and enhance the student experience. Our in-house built platform, Studynet, which has been in continuous use and ongoing development since 2001, has facilitated a continuum of student engagement from blended approaches to studying via online or distance learning modes. In 2014 we embarked on a two year, in-depth consultation process with students and staff to identify the vision for our future online environment. Through the process we co-developed a set of pedagogic principles and aspirations for our new VLE which resulted in our vision of a 'Guided Learner Journey' (GLJ). To enable our vision we purchased Canvas (a virtual learning environment) and Talis (a reading management software) and through our close working relationship, and the innovative approach of Canvas, we have embedded the softwares within Studynet to enable the implementation of the GLJ. In our presentation we will share our consultation and prototyping process as well as well as training programme we have developed to ensure the smooth implementation of our vision.

Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire is a post-92 institution with 24,500 students (including over 3500 international students) and over 2000 staff. We were one of the first universities in the UK to embrace the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and embed it as part of our learning and teaching strategy to personalise and enhance the student experience. Our in-house built platform, Studynet, has been in continuous use and development since 2001, and has facilitated a continuum of student engagement from blended approaches to online distance learning. Studynet performs to a very high standard and is very much embedded into the University culture and working practices.

Recognising limitations of the programming software on which Studynet was developed and the need to consider the requirements of an online learning environment fit for the future (Burnes, 2004) we embarked on a large scale change management process. Kanter et al's (1992) '10 commandments for executing change' identify the importance of communicating, involving people and being honest so in 2014 we embarked on an extensive and University wide consultation process. Through the consultation we aimed to articulate a shared vision through empowering individuals from all parts of the Institution (Kotter, 1996). As Luecke (2003), advocates within the 'Seven Steps to Change' "*Start change at the periphery, then let it spread to other units without pushing it from the top*" which was a very important approach for us.

Our consultation processes included:

- discussion forums with staff from all 10 academic Schools
- student focus groups including students from all Schools and all levels of study

- online forums with distance learning/online students
- idea gathering at our annual learning and teaching conference
- meetings within the Hertfordshire Students' Union
- discussion forums with the Doctoral College including supervisors and PGR students
- idea gathering at our partner conference
- survey feedback from alumni.

The subsequent aspirations for our new VLE were therefore co-produced with staff and students and focused on what we wanted from a VLE rather than specific details about functionality or look and feel.

Principles

Through the suggestions of students, alumni and colleagues we were able to develop innovative and challenging principles which were agreed by the whole university community.

Our VLE should:

1. be simple and intuitive to use and developed around the needs of students and staff;
2. provide a personalised portal that will support a range of pedagogically sound learning and assessment opportunities;
3. facilitate effective communication between staff and students; students and their peers; and students and their representatives;
4. facilitate the provision of a consistent experience across a student's modules;
5. give students a clear sense of their learning pathways (within each module and across their modules);
6. enable students to enhance their learning pathways and create a record of their learning by annotating, adding to it and sharing it as they see fit;
7. provide effective data analytic and module feedback mechanisms to facilitate module enhancement, student success and student satisfaction;
8. seamlessly integrate third party services, giving staff and students greater choice in how to support and engage in learning.

Throughout the consultation process, the importance of communicating a clear learning pathway to students and enabling students to shape, add to, and share their learning journey became increasingly evident. Ensuring students have a clear sense of their learning pathways (principle 5) relates to the importance of a scaffolded approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). We also identified the need for students to direct their own learning (Bruner, 1957) and be able to enhance their learning pathways through the online environment (principle 6) (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013). This led us to the notion of developing the 'Guided Learner Journey'.

The Guided Learner Journey (GLJ) Project

Once we had established the vision and principles for our GLJ, the project entered the first of four phases.

Phase 1: Prototyping

Our first challenge was to translate the principles into a tangible model to allow us to test and

refine the GLJ vision. Identifying the importance of principles 5 and 6 we specified requirements which needed to be in place in order to enable principles 5 and 6.

- Module websites should provide a consistent delivery of learning activities and resources
- There should be provision of a timeline / overview for learning activities and assessment points at module and programme level
- Students should be able to comment on and supplement the resources and learning activities in the GLJ
- A more effective search functionality should be available
- Simpler mechanisms to provide links to journals, eBooks and other external resources
- Students should be able to customise / personalise their view of the module website, including alternative views of the GLJ by, for example, topic rather than timeline

We then created a fully working prototype module within our existing Studynet platform and this 'Academic Skills' module was made available to all students on a voluntary basis. More than 100 students engaged with the prototype and were surveyed and interviewed about their experiences. Forty staff were also consulted for their views. In one School (Computer Science), the prototype was used as a 'live' learning project within a user-centred design module and the resulting student reports, which were also part of the module assessment, were fed back into our project development process.

Some of the student comments included:

"It's like an interactive support"

"Seems more student led ...is good"

"Modern layout... spaced out.... really good compared to current one... enhanced"

Students also made suggestions:

"Can we have a poke button if tutors haven't replied?"

"I would want a notification and take me to the comment, would also be nice to see if that person is online so I could have online chat with them"

From staff perspectives, there was positivity associated with the look and feel as well as the usability of the prototype module:

"This is great – removes so much clunkiness"

"Looks really usable"

"Really love it. Very good."

"Please keep the interface clean and uncluttered"

"TV Guide concept at Programme Level would be brilliant"

There were however some concerns over the structured nature of the prototype which was intended to ensure consistency:

"Does the system constrain freedom of staff? Are we constrained by the weekly topic / subject approach?"

"There is a fine line between consistency and individuality – are we restricting academic freedom?"

Phase 2: Full-Scale Pilot

The extensive feedback gathered about our prototype module was used to refine the prototype and create a 'module template' for the GLJ, including a dynamic 'assessment landscape', within Studynet. Twenty six 'live' modules were delivered in the GLJ format in 2016/17. Over 2,500 students and 95 staff representing all Academic Schools took part. We received over 1000 pieces of feedback from students and we were able to summarise their comments:

Positive Summaries:

- Better organised / Helps me keep up-to-date / helps me prepare
- Like the progress bar – helps me keep track of where I am
- Like the week-by-week layout
- Easy to use / simple navigation / prefer the GLJ
- Easier to find information
- Better design

Negative Summaries:

- GLJ Content doesn't appear in my Module / Course activity stream
- Found the layout and navigation to GLJ tedious
- Difficult to locate a specific item
- Week numbers are confusing
- Bland / boring looking

Structured interviews were held with module leaders and they provided us with further feedback. Tutors liked the module structure being given to them, and found it prompted additional thinking about how they layout their course and supporting materials. There were very positive comments about the guided learning approach and most tutors took the opportunity to provide suggestions for wider implementation and enhancement to the look and feel of module sites.

The prototype and pilot stages validated the GLJ approach and identified the benefits of our current ideas as well as suggestions for enhancements. It was at this point that we began work on the specification for the platform(s) which would help us deliver our vision. Staff and students from the pilot phase, plus other key stakeholders (e.g. Associate Deans Learning and Teaching and Academic Quality Assurance, Library staff, Students' Union representatives) took part in a half-day workshop where feedback from the pilot alongside our GLJ principles were used to co-create the detailed specification for our new platform.

Phase 3: Selecting our partners

Through a competitive tender process we looked for suppliers who could help us deliver our GLJ. We needed creative, innovative and student-focused providers who could meet our specification and also demonstrated a commitment to partnership working for future development. Students and staff from our pilot modules were heavily involved in the testing of tendered products and we listened carefully to feedback from individuals about usability, look and feel as well as consideration of alignment with our principles. We chose Talis Aspire (a reading management software) to support the development of guided reading lists

thus supporting pre and post class study and we chose Canvas as our virtual learning environment, whose clean interface, superb usability and structured and consistent approach aligned with our vision. Through our close working relationship and innovative approach of Canvas we have implemented the softwares within Studynet to enable implementation of our GLJ.

Canvas have been very interested in our long term plans in relation to programme level development within Studynet and we have been invited to engage in beta testing of their future developments, demonstrating a partnership commitment on both sides.

Stage 4: Implementation

Since we are not simply migrating from one VLE platform to another, but transforming our approach to enhancing student learning, we have taken a supportive and measured approach to full implementation. From this academic year, all first year modules have been migrated to the GLJ within the new VLE platform. All remaining modules will be migrated by the start of 2018/19.

Staff support:

We have provided extensive staff training and support in innovative ways including: an extensive regular programme of workshops; one-to-one sessions; programme, subject-level or School-level bespoke workshops; training videos and other online resources. We have created an online module for staff showcasing the principles of the GLJ, to provide support and act as an exemplar of good practice. So far, over 700 staff have been trained and feedback is extremely positive:

“I love [the GLJ] and I’m so happy we got training before the summer starts. Everything has been so well organised”.

A key aspect of the support for staff has come from Student Technology Mentors. We employ over 20 student technology mentors to support staff on a one-to-one basis, helping them to create and manage new module sites including developing their integrated reading lists. This collaboration has proved extremely positive with benefits for both staff and the students. Initial staff anxiety about calling on students for help was dispelled by the insight and expertise mentors brought to the task. Students also gained an understanding of what happens ‘behind the scenes’.

“Mentors provide a valuable insight to challenge staff preconceptions of what students need or should be doing. Their professionalism in doing this is impressive”
Computer Science staff member.

“It really is satisfying to help someone work through the problems and achieve their goal” Life and Medical Sciences Student Mentor.

Student support:

To aid their transition into university, students can access our ‘Preparing for University’ MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), designed and delivered via our GLJ principles. In the recent start of term survey, 88% of participants rated the MOOC useful or very useful. Student comments are very positive about their experience of learning through the GLJ:

“It allows me to see the structure of my module and how it’s split into different parts. This helps me when planning out my revision.”

The implementation to date has been remarkably smooth with 100% of modules migrated on time and staff and student feedback remaining extremely positive. Our next phase of development is already underway and is a prototype ‘programme level view’ of the GLJ so that students will be able to see the full landscape of their learning journey over time; personalise it; and enhance it to provide a more meaningful learning experience.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the development of our Guided Learner Journey. The success of the project can be traced back to the development of our shared vision for the GLJ and our continual consultation (Stacey, 2012). We have engaged staff and students at every stage of the process from initial consultation to implementation; listened to all views; and stayed true to the principles that we co-created and share. This has allowed us to shift thinking around the purpose and use of the VLE in our institution, reinforcing the student experience at the heart of our philosophy. It has been a learning journey that we continue to share.

References

- Beetham, H and Sharpe, R. (2013). *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age: Designing for 21st Century Learning*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Bruner, J. S. (1957). *Going beyond the information given*. New York: Norton.
- Burnes, B. (2004). *Managing Change: A Strategic Approach to Organisational Dynamics*, 4th edn. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Kanter, R. M., Stein, B. A. and Jick, T. D. (1992). *The Challenge of Organizational Change*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Luecke, R. (2003). *Managing Change and Transition*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Stacey, R. (2012). *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management*. New York: Oxon
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.