

Guidelines to institutional managers and service providers from the STROLL project findings

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Introduction

The STROLL project reported on a set of Learners Journeys over a two year research project at the University of Hertfordshire. Students participating in the project completed video and audio diaries between May 2007 and October 2008 recording their experiences of using technology to support their learning. Outcomes from the project which was one of the JISC funded Learners' Experiences Phase 2 projects are available from the project wiki at <https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2>.

This paper sets out a brief summary of the findings from STROLL as they relate to

- induction,
- institutional support and embedding technology into the culture of the institution
- use of personal technology.

The summary findings of the STROLL project were:-

- All students accessed the internet regularly for learning support and most expected to continue their studies beyond the 9-6 Monday to Friday window when classes were held.
- The busier the students the more likely they were to be highly organised in their use of time (whether as parents or in paid employment), using StudyNet strategically for completing their studies, often through the evenings.
- Students moving from FE to HE reported a much increased workload and an expectation of needing to work independently.
- All the students, except one, commented highly favourably on the provision of the MLE StudyNet and how essential it was for providing online support for their learning.
- Students demonstrated a growing maturity in their choices of technology and their use of online tools to support their learning towards the end of their courses.
- Students used their own technologies such as mobile phones and mp3 players creatively as an integral part of their learning.

Guidelines for Induction

Many students arrive at university as competent and confident users of technology as previous studies into the expectations of new students indicate (e.g (Barrett and Jefferies 2005; Jefferies, Quadri et al. 2006 ; Jefferies, Quadri et al. 2007). All programmes however expect to offer a well supported series of sessions through Induction Week to ensure students regardless of prior experience are assisted in their use of online learning. Some use of computers in the registration process and the location of registration and enrolment in the main Learning Resources Centre mean that students soon become familiar with the physical environment.

Students arriving from FE programmes have already had the opportunity of using the MLE at Hertfordshire and this supports their familiarity building process. They all commented on how much larger the size of classes was and how there was a need to develop independent ways of learning. The volume of reading expected was a surprise to many. More preparation could have helped them to be ready for the move from a Foundation degree environment to final year studies on Honours programmes.

Induction week can be a bewildering series of events for new students and many in the STROLL project commented on the usefulness of online material which meant they could go back later in the term and find out what they needed to know if they had forgotten.

Guidelines for institutional support and embedding technology into the culture of the institution

Embedding an e-learning culture across an institution takes time but the incoming generations of students expect to have e-learning access and support for their courses and praise its benefits. There is much recent literature about the expectations of the 16-18 age group regarding the ubiquity of technology in their learning experience prior to HE education (e.g ECAR (Caruso and Salaway 2007), JISC (Maidment-Otlet 2008). Many of the incoming 18 year olds have been using interactive whiteboards in their schools and expect easily available online access to their learning when they go to university. In our experience, reliable, accessible personalised portals to the students' learning materials are highly prized and widely used. At Hertfordshire it is extremely rare that the managed learning environment StudyNet is unavailable to students. They depend on it being there for whenever they choose to study, at any time of the day or night and many students access StudyNet from home for studying in the evening and at weekends. Remote access was noted as being especially useful for non-traditional learners, who worked part-time or had families so they could access their learning at evenings and weekends. The Learning Resources Centre at College Lane is open 24/7 throughout the academic year and other resource centres have generous opening times as well.

When StudyNet was first introduced in 2001, there was an institution-wide programme of expected and increasing usage by all registered programmes over 3 academic years, including the pilot year when all Level 1 modules were expected to have a presence on StudyNet. This was a top-down initiative throughout the university, supported and promoted by the senior management. By 2003-2004 all modules on all undergraduate and Masters level programmes used StudyNet as the first port of call for making study information available to students. Functionality has increased year by year and now includes options for setting up virtual discussion groups, wikis, and blogs. Podcasts and now video

streaming are options for academics to make available to their students and these have been highly valued by STROLL project participants, for revision. The ability to revisit lecture notes, listen to lectures again – i.e. through podcasts - see handouts online is much appreciated. We have progressed to the point where 7 years on from the start of using the MLE it has become largely accepted in the university culture and its use is ubiquitous and expected for all programmes and modules. Those who spent a year at a different institution exclaimed how good Study Net is compared to the ones they had used at the other institutions.

The University's MLE was heavily used and highly prized by the STROLL students for accessing study materials, taking part in discussions and keeping in touch with other students and academics. Students expected and demonstrated their use of e-learning 24/7 on and off campus. Academics were encouraged to identify on the home page for each module how often they would check the module pages online and how fast students might expect a reply to an email, whether e.g. a 24 hour or 48 hour turn around during the week.

Supporting students and academics who are not confident users of technology has been an important part of embedding e-learning in the culture. The university offers regular workshops and skills updating sessions to staff. At the faculty level there are local StudyNet champions who support colleagues on a one to one basis, acknowledging that some academics may need additional support to produce online materials.

Providing easily available local targeted support is important for those who are hesitant users of technology so they do not fall behind in their learning. This may include but is not necessarily limited to mature learners and those who missed out on ICT skills at school/college. For students a large number of on-line support guides have been produced by the learning consultants for each faculty, under the generic title of i-SPY guides. There are introductory sessions as a part of the induction process but the online guides provide ongoing support through the academic year. Many students are connecting enthusiastically with technology but those who have not previously had the chance to go online need to have the support provided.

While students praised the availability of StudyNet they were keen to maintain their on-campus teaching through lectures and seminars. Novel examples of technology used for learning included Google docs, Voice to text software to support the writing of assignments.

Guidelines for the use of personal technology

Students were enthusiastic users of technology in the STROLL study. 74% had their own computer or laptop and 88% accessed the internet at least daily. The university's helpdesks

in the learning resources centres provide regular technical support surgeries for students' own laptop problems. All the students had their own mobile phones and some of these phones were sophisticated enough to connect to the internet and were used to download notes and emails for learning. The university's wireless network was an unseen part of the support provided to students, who expected to access their learning and social lives wherever they were on campus.

Students use informal online social networks extensively for their social lives and generally prefer to keep these separate from their learning and networks provided by the institution. Students reported accessing general information such as news online rather than necessarily watching television or reading a newspaper and accessed material from other academic sites eg MIT, picking and choosing what they felt would be useful and interesting to them. They would use factual TV programmes such as Prime Minister's Question Time for learning support. Personal technologies whether laptops or mobile phones or mp3 players were used extensively and creatively by students.

The research team were surprised at the range of personal technologies owned by students for leisure and the students themselves expressed surprise when they realised after keeping their diaries for a week at how much time they were spending online both for learning and leisure.

All the Halls of Residence on the campus now provide internet access from the individual student rooms. There were no specific barriers or complaints except that at busy times access could be slow. The university has its own policy on usage and this restricts the use of games and VOIP on university owned computers.

Conclusions

The widening participation agenda has increased the number of learners from traditional and non-traditional backgrounds in HE. The environment from which many of them arrive is one where technology is ubiquitous in their lives for both learning and leisure. Support for all types of student whether part-time or full-time is essential to helping them engage with the technologies that can support their learning and provide flexibility for their complex lifestyles. This support needs to be easily available from Induction Week or before and preferably online.

An embedded MLE which supports student learning is **very** popular as an integral part of the learning environment and especially because it offered access to learning materials 24/7. This was highly valued by our students and promoted as essential by our non-traditional learners to manage the conflicting demands on their time. Students' graduate skills are enhanced by their widespread use of technology for learning and university study provides an opportunity to grow and develop these.

References

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