Scope

- The Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme funded a total of ten projects from 2005 to 2009, to explore learners' perceptions of and participation in technology-enhanced learning in a digital age
- Earlier research addressed learners' experiences of single modules, technologies or curriculum interventions; the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme covered the holistic nature of learners' experiences of learning, with a focus on learners' own words
- The projects piloted a range of innovative methodologies and techniques for eliciting the learner voice
- Nearly 3,500 learners responded to surveys, and around 260 were involved in a sustained way

Audience

This guidance is designed for:

- Practitioners in further and higher education, including teaching staff such as lecturers, tutors, course leaders, mentors, facilitators and coaches
- Learning technologists and ILT champions
- Educational developers

A guide for practitioners

What have we learnt?

Learners' expectations of e-learning

As a result of the pervasiveness of technology, e-learning can no longer be viewed as purely institutionally or course based: learning can be enhanced by more effective and far-reaching uses of digital technologies in a range of settings. Learners of all ages are now likely to have access to technology and social software and make use of whatever they have available to fit learning into their lives.

The so-called 'Google generation' have high expectations of digital technology, for example that it will be robust, flexible, responsive to their personal needs, and available anywhere. However, many learners do not have a clear understanding of how courses could or should use technology to support their learning. Learners still rely to a great extent on their lecturers for guidance.

While many practitioners feel that their 'digitally native' learners are running ahead of them, there is evidence that age is not the main determining factor in technology confidence and capability: a supportive context, for example, is far more significant. Highly confident users of digital technology may struggle to transfer those skills to their study. Practitioners therefore have a critical role to play.

To help establish and meet learners' expectations, practitioners can consider:

- Providing clear explanations about the technologies that learners are expected to use, both in terms of the support available and the educational benefits

This guide forms part of *Responding to Learners*, a synthesis of outcomes of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme. For further information on the other guides in this series, the projects and their findings, and downloadable resources for practitioners, researchers and managers, visit: **https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2**

'Students learn differently and want choice.'

Student, University of Edinburgh

- Ensuring essential course information and learning resources are available via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – learners expect this as a minimum
- Offering 'tasters' of potentially innovative learning activities that learners can try online
- Exploring what colleagues are doing – learners expect consistency in their experience of technology, and this encourages the sharing of practice and expertise
- Treating new technologies as an opportunity to share skills, acknowledging that some learners may be highly proficient while others are very unsure
- Recognising that their own skills and how they explain the use of technology to learners are of critical importance: practitioners should seek help from experts, colleagues and learners, and make use of development opportunities

Balance and diversity

Learners value real-world interaction as well as the flexibility of digital resources. They stress that learning with technology should be balanced with face-to-face and paper-based learning, and they recognise good teaching independently of the technologies used to support it.

Learners show immense diversity in their preferences for and experiences of technology. Most adopt a mix-and-match approach, for example using paper to draw mind-maps and diagrams and for diary keeping, but computers for word processing and online research.

To respect learners' different preferences and the balance of media appropriate for different learning goals, practitioners can consider:

- Finding out what technologies learners are using in their private study and leisure time
- Offering more than one media option where practical, for example podcast and lecture notes, graphic and text
- Using different communication channels for important messages about the course – learners may not use institutional email
- Using technology to give learners meaningful choices about how, when and where they engage with study
- Offering information and learning resources in electronic format, allowing learners to customise how they access

them – this is particularly important for learners with disabilities who use assistive technologies

- Giving learners opportunities to practise tasks using different technologies – for example blogs, wikis, e-portfolios and web pages – and find out their different affordances

ICT and information skills

Despite their familiarity with personal technologies, learners often lack skills in using technology to help them learn. Learners are particularly likely to overestimate their ability to find and evaluate information online. Google searching is learners' first recourse, and learners continue to prefer sites like Wikipedia over academic online resources, even after some time at university or college.

There is a growing body of evidence that ICT and information skills are better retained if they are fully integrated into programmes of study where learners can see their relevance and practise new skills progressively.

To support development of learners' ICT and information skills, practitioners can consider:

- Factoring in the time it takes for learners to develop new ICT skills: make no assumptions about their familiarity with specific technologies
- Clearly communicating expectations about how learners will access and use online resources, and what kinds of resources are academically valued
- Designing tasks that require learners to deal critically with online information and with information in different media
- Being clear about the importance of information skills, either by assessing skills directly or by explaining how they will improve performance
- Being better informed about what the library or learning resource centre and learner support and other central services can offer learners, and signpost sources of guidance
- Working with subject librarians and other specialist staff to bring ICT and information skills provision to learners

Digital literacies for learning and for life

Beyond ICT and information skills, this JISC-funded research for the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme reveals

'I'm one of these people that tends to learn from doing... if I actually go through the process a couple of times it sticks so much better, and having the ICT enabled me to actually do it.'

Student, The Open University

that successful learners require a complex range of digital capabilities. These skills include communicating in different media, collaboration, self-organisation, self-presentation, managing identities, critical reading and creative expression in different media, navigating virtual spaces/worlds, coping with distractions and digital overload, staying safe, choosing appropriate blends of technology, and managing public–private boundaries in online social spaces. There is little evidence that learners' private practices are providing them with all these capabilities, and there is much that formal education can add. In particular, learning takes place through active engagement in meaningful tasks.

To help learners develop a range of digital literacies, practitioners can consider:

- Designing learning activities in which digital technologies are integral
- Using Web 2.0 technologies, where appropriate, for learning and collaborative knowledge building
- Supporting the use of e-portfolios to aid reflection, planning, and self-presentation
- Reflecting on how professional and scholarly practice is changing in response to digital opportunities, and ensuring learners engage with these digitally enabled practices – ideally in authentic tasks
- Modelling expected behaviours in digital communication, for example responding promptly to email, allowing themselves to be video/audio recorded, facilitating interaction in virtual spaces
- Establishing and nurturing online learning communities to create a feeling of group and professional identity

The role of peers

Peers play an important and often unacknowledged role in the learning experience. Many learners use personal technologies to elicit help from others, whether through one-to-one messages, Facebook or Google groups. This collaboration mostly occurs without the support or knowledge of tutors, although some programmes are designed to maximise the opportunities for peer support.

To encourage peer learning, practitioners can consider:

- Offering collective feedback or organising peer feedback on assignments, for example using discussion groups and document sharing
- Identifying successful strategies for learning with technology, ideally giving examples in learners' own words
- Establishing a mentoring or 'study buddy' system – this can work well across year groups, so novice learners are supported by more experienced peers
- Ensuring learners have private (non-tutor-led) online spaces to discuss course-related matters, and not worrying if they prefer to use their own social software
- Being sensitive to learners' feelings about 'their' online spaces when integrating social software into study

Creating a culture of innovation

Learners' expectations of technology use may be limited by their lack of academic experience. They rarely push for use of particular technologies and may be quite conservative in their willingness to change habits. Web 2.0 tools for knowledge building (for example, wikis, peer review and social tagging), immersive environments (for example Second Life, subject-specific simulations and interactive video) and e-portfolios offer learning benefits that learners rarely discover for themselves. This challenges tutors to be proactive in helping their learners adopt new ways of learning.

In this research, learners who had used technology to overcome barriers to study, for example disabled and distance learners, were often the most innovative and agile.

When considering innovations in teaching, practitioners can consider:

- Experiencing the technology from a learner's point of view before deciding whether and how to use it
- Offering learners time to become familiar with the new tools before expecting them to tackle academic tasks
- Communicating and modelling expectations about how to behave in virtual environments
- Involving learners in making decisions and seeking their feedback regularly
- Thinking about learners' different needs and encouraging learners to share their technical skills with their peers
- Noting where the planned innovations are made more difficult by institutional practices such as timetabling, booking systems, and ICT and network policies – and raising issues with managers
- Learning from what colleagues are doing and encouraging a culture of shared practice

How can we embed the learner voice?

Technologies and learners are diverse and changing rapidly, so it is an ongoing commitment to respond to learners' experiences with technology. Practitioners can consider:

- Using the technologies that learners have available (for example, mobile phones) or are using for the course (for example, electronic voting systems, blogs and VLEs) to capture feedback while they are engaged with learning
- Recording which technologies learners prefer
- Evaluating learners' experiences using a range of methods (See Guide 5 for researchers for further information)