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VLE a blessing or a curse: VLE use by HE Academic Staff

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Abstract: This study makes use of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) can be supported in a Higher Education setting. Data analysis showed that holistic support strategies were capable of targeting larger groups of teachers effectively via staff development workshops and strategies. School-wide mechanisms were embedded establishing a 'standard' for the VLE. Once adoption of the VLE across the school had reached its peak, course teams required bespoke and specialised support. This required revisiting the (formative and summative) assessment techniques in module specifications to incorporate this use of the VLE. In conclusion, use of the VLE has levelled after the 'peak', individualised support is critical to maintain progression and benefit of the VLE which can be done through short-term strategies. The skill-set of those providing the support evolved from technical expertise to one that incorporates a good understanding of relative pedagogy.

Context

The University of Huddersfield was one of the first universities to have a VLE in 2001. The benefits of such an e-learning environment have long been recognised by the university. The fact that this e-learning technology has had mixed reactions from the academic staff has been disappointing for both its supporters and the students (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007. University of Huddersfield, 2007).
There are over 18,000 students using the university VLE both on and off campus and whilst the VLE is available to all schools within the university this study will only examine its use in the School of Education and Professional Development (University of Huddersfield, 2007). In this school there are 4,900 full and part-time students who are engaged in research and teaching activities for both main stream and post compulsory education as well as personal and professional development (University of Huddersfield, Administrator, 2009). The school has been awarded the distinction for excellent teaching by The Times Higher Education Supplement league table in May 2005 as well as being recognized as a 'Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' by the DfES (HEFCE, 2004). In 2007 the university was awarded the status of a 'Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training'. With such prestigious awards one could expect that the university's VLE was accessed and used regularly by its academic staff, that teaching and learning was enhanced by this e-learning technology.

Teaching and Learning Environment

To ensure that academic staff are maintaining their abilities to encompass e-learning within their lectures, regular in-house skills training sessions have been provided by the Learning Technology Advisors for the use of both the Interactive White Boards (IWB) and the VLE. The training should be pedagogically driven rather than technologically which the university accepted as the most beneficial to both academic staff and students (DfES, 2004. University of Huddersfield, 2007). The academic staff is expected to use their skill and knowledge regarding e-learning within both their lectures and outside teaching time and thus keep their

students current with the advancements within this area of teaching and learning. When student teachers go into schools their skills and knowledge regarding e-teaching and learning should be at least current because they should have experienced them during their time at the university (Ofsted, 2009). Attendance for academic staff at these, mainly lunch-time, training sessions is voluntary.

Every teaching room has an IWB and access to the internet. The computers are dual-serving in that they can be either Apple Mac or a PC using either Apple or Windows XP as their platform. Academic staff have logging-in rights to all computers and can log on to more than one computer at the same time. The academic staff has therefore access to the VLE in all teaching rooms as well as their office (Ofsted, 2009).

Diversity of Teaching within the school

Through giving continuous training and updating it was anticipated that this would encourage the academic staff to have new ways of thinking about their teaching. This appears to have had very little impact within certain quarters of the school's academic staff, nationally similar finding are concurred by DfES (2004) and HEFCE (2005) who also found that staff development on its own had little impact (Ofsted, 2009).

The innovative use of this technology was not universally accepted within the school (QAA, 2007). This was having a detrimental affect on the teaching practices of some of the academic staff who were falling behind and not fulfilling student expectations. At Student Panel meetings there were complaints that some academic staff were not using the VLE sufficiently while other staff were using it very regularly (University of Huddersfield – Computing and Library Services, 2009).

To counter this diversity a directive from the Dean of School required all academic staff to use the VLE more; also that staff should be using e-learning technologies within their teaching and to also encouraging students to participate in using the VLE for their learning. Inspections by Ofsted, QAA and QCA have highlighted the school's use of e-technologies. An Institutional Audit has focused academic staff's use of e-teaching and learning technologies. For this audit all module outlines, detailed content of work, examples of tasks and samples of student work had to be on the VLE (University of Huddersfield – staff portal 2008). The use of the VLE by academic staff, previous to this, was patchy with some course leaders using the VLE as intended and others not at all. This changed with the impending institutional audit as the VLE had to contain information from all courses.

Records of usage of the VLE over a period of five years has brought about some interesting anomalies, with some tutors 'peeking' years before the audit and then falling back with the use of the VLE.

Research Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect the data for this paper. An analysis of each teaching module on the VLE was carried out and allocated with a score of 1 to 7 depending on the amount of information or user activity present on module areas. The criteria for categorising the teaching modules was as followed. The lowest score of 1 was given to a module that was not present on the VLE that should have been; the score of 2 was given to an empty module without any of the instructors attached to it. This is any module that has no content in the VLE without any tutors enrolled to it. The effect of this was that no tutor can actually upload content to this particular module. Third was an empty module area that has no content present but some tutors are attached to the module. Category four contained 'Some materials' in this instance 'some materials' refers to modules that have a minimum of 6 pieces of content. The last three categories contained a large selection of materials where additional interactive features were in use. The highest scoring category contained modules that had a large selection of a wide range of materials and where several web 2.0 or advanced features were in use; Such as Discussion Boards, Wikis, Blogs, Podcasts or surveys.

The scoring of the modules for each course was then compared to the data from semi-structured interviews with course leaders. Categorization was used to map allocated ratings for each module against the justification of pedagogy that underpinned the use of modules in the VLE (Scott and Morrison, 2006). Finally, a combination of the two methods provided two outputs. The first was the score for each course. This was in the range of 1 – 5, 5 being the most apparently effective use of the VLE to engage learners and a 1 for the courses that required most improvement. The second output was the recommendations that were

derived after interviews with staff and noted as potential targets. The agreed targets helped to form the annual strategy for the Learning Technologies team.

Results and Interpretations

Data from the module analysis showed rapid growth in the first 2 years where modules in the first two categories had declined to almost total eradication. At the same time modules in the higher scoring category had quadrupled (see figure 1 below). The shift of module scores from the lower categories to the higher categories highlighted the positive effects of the LT strategy. As time progressed this growth seemed to slow down to an extent in the last two years with very little difference. This coincided with the decline of generic training programmes that were aimed at staff to increase their use of technology in teaching and learning. Instead, this basic level of training was embedded into staff induction programmes and all first year students were also inducted, raising the 'minimum standard' of use of the VLE.
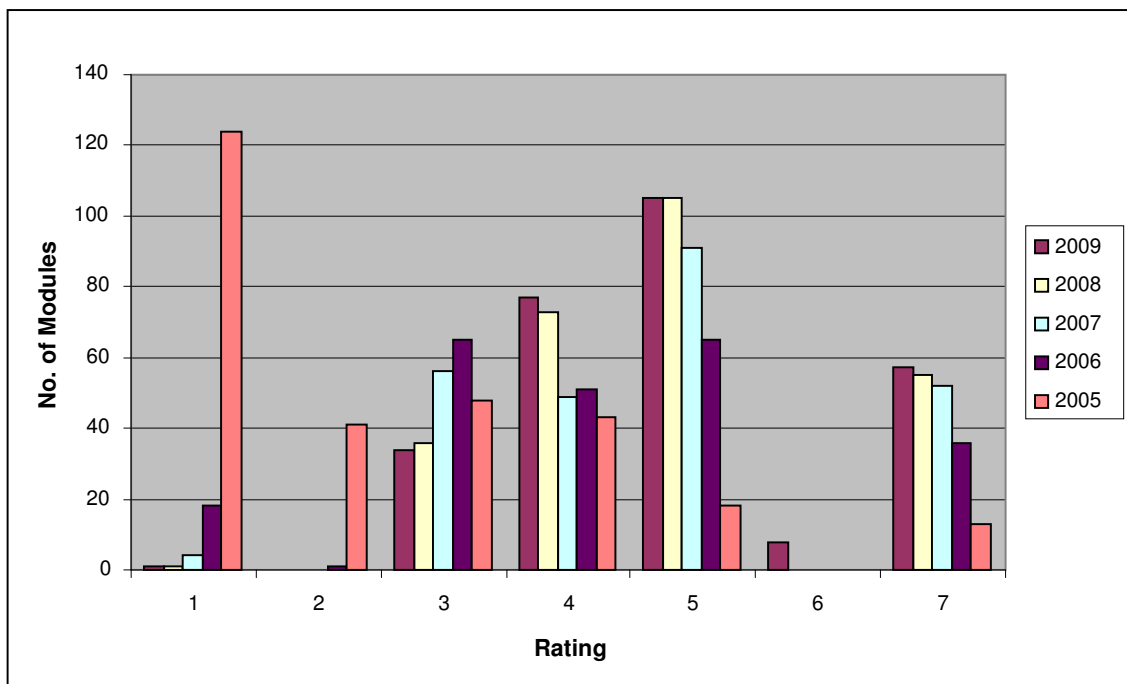

Figure 1: Module Scores over a Five Year Period

Courses in the first two years increased their use of the VLE significantly. Courses achieved a moderate level of usage by teaching staff and students where most of the course modules were populated with up to date content. A moderate scoring course would make use of one of the advanced features in about a third of its teaching modules. There were courses where significant usage was achieved after the first two years of the study. There was a rapid decline of usage on one course by both staff and students. This appeared to be caused by changes in the course team as well-established staff members leaving the institution. The usage then slowly increased over the next three years as staff became more familiar with the VLE.
The courses seemed to reach maturity in use of the VLE at around the '4' rating. Courses which employed blended learning appeared to surpass the 4 rating. Newly developed courses appeared to attain a significant rating from the start.
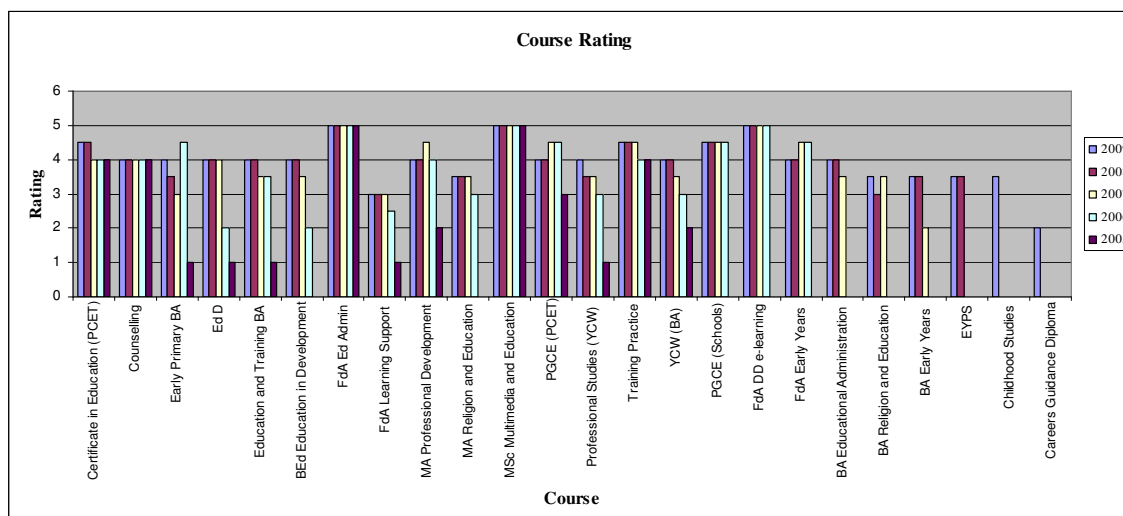
Figure2: Course Rating

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is a significantly greater use of the VLE by both students and academic staff. The minimum standard of use of the VLE by new courses appears to be comparable to the mature courses. This minimum standard was resultant from the embedded inductions for new staff and students. One of the drivers behind the increased usage of the VLE was the student voice which complained of a disparity of usage by academic staff.

Streamlining of administrative systems enabled all modules to be present on the VLE with allocated teaching staff resources and information regarding the module. Generic course areas on the VLE appeared to have had an impact on the use of the VLE by both staff and students.

To raise the level of rating for each course it is recommended that lunchtime training sessions given by the Learning Technology staff should be re-introduced. To further increase course ratings beyond the maturity barrier, it is imperative that specialist support is provided to teaching staff and students. This should go beyond just skills training and incorporate more advanced methods to include areas as assessment and creative activities. The Learning Technology staff that supports this development should have a sound understanding of the pedagogy required to implement such changes.

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