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Learning from the Learners' Experience

e-learning@greenwich

Post-Conference Reflections




Edited with an introduction by
Simon Walker, Malcolm Ryan and Robert Teed

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Foreword

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Whilst the phenomenon of e-learning is still relatively young, it has certainly moved from the margins to the mainstream of educational thinking and practice during the past decade. Through our annual e-learning@greenwich conferences, we have been keen to map the progress of practitioners' experiences of e-learning during this exciting period of development.

At the 2008 conference we turned our attention to the learners' experience, a key element of the e-learning equation that often gets taken for granted. Or, as Towle & Draffan (Ch.4) put it more resonantly: 'Learners' voices [are] more like whispers, and their experiences and opinions [are] not heard by the wider community'. Time and again in conference, we learned of the insights gained by teachers from connecting with students in different ways, and by actively listening to them – yielding qualitatively different results to normal evaluation that suggest the rich opportunities that are available for curriculum development through the act of co-creation.

In the spirit of 'learning from the learners' experience', a new feature to the 2008 conference was the involvement of students in presentations. This really brought the conference to life and deeply engaged practitioners and researchers. Some of the students' input can be read here, as can reflections from practitioners on the discussions that emerged during conference. We would especially like to thank the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) for their support, which enabled us to provide free places for students.

The opening and closing keynote presentations are represented here in Chapters 1 and 20. At first glance, they might seem poles apart: Rhona Sharpe (Ch.1) focuses on listening to and empowering e-learners, whilst Nigel Ecclesfield (Ch.20) presents an analysis of current governmental policy thinking. However, in their broadest reach they are fittingly close, for both Sharpe and Ecclesfield emphasise the importance of listening to the learner's voice and making both pedagogy and policy more learner-centred.

As the diverse papers here engage with the central issue of 'listening to learners', a number of common themes emerge: what constitutes the student experience of e-learning; how teachers and institutions can devise different ways of listening; how different research methodologies should be developed; and how technologies should be adapted – specifically, how virtual learning environments can be made more interactive and engaging for learners. On this last point, one is left with the impression that students of the so-called Net Generation may well be technologically adept, but that they are also inherently conservative in their approach to e-learning – favouring face-to-face tutorials or blended learning, resisting 'old-fashioned' VLE designs, but embracing familiar-looking environments (such as those developed by Keenan & Currant in Ch.17).

The overarching conclusion from these papers is that effective e-learning environments grow from a rich and integrated consultation between teachers and students. The implication is also that a truly fruitful consultation needs to include software developers, engineers and organisational management teams. As Robertson (2008:825) concluded, having conceptualised e-learning as a pedagogic activity system: 'Any change management towards sustainable e-learning must address the power dynamics that occur at the interface of the activity systems'

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Contents

Introduction

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The 2008 e-learning@greenwich/conference has yielded another crop of fascinating and engaging papers that we are delighted to gather together in published form. We hope also that readers will appreciate the following chapters are more than a record of conference proceedings, for many delegates have been encouraged to include within their papers detailed reflections on, and analyses of, their experiences of presenting at the Greenwich conference.

In Chapter 1, Rhona Sharpe summarises her 2008 keynote address and suggests that it is inappropriate to characterise all young learners as products of the Net Generation. Sharpe argues that learning styles and types are 'complex and individual', and it is the responsibility of institutions to enable all students to use technology and e-learning effectively. In addition, Sharpe provides an important developmental model to illustrate the learner's transition to the apex of effective e-learning - the 'creative appropriation' of technology.

Roy Williams et al. (Chapter 2) recount a fascinating project they entitle 'Nested Narratives'. Their research has developed an approach that aids learners' reflection but also supports assimilation into professional identities. Using 'reflective' interview techniques, Williams et al. encourage students to embed their own imagery and language in their 'learning narrative'. The advantage is that the listener/researcher gains access to the strategies that the learner has used in order to learn, and the 'telling' becomes part of the learning process for the learner.

The research of Ceridwen Coulby and Viktoria Joynes, in Chapter 3, highlights the usefulness of student consultation at all stages of curriculum development. Their work provides an interesting reflection on the differences in student engagement and how different universities respond to this. Gemma Towle & E. A. Draffan (Chapter 4) discuss the role of interviews and changing interview techniques in collecting information from

students about their experiences. In particular, they examine the added-value of the 'Interview Plus' technique, concluding with an informative list of guidelines for conducting a successful interview.

In Chapter 5, Liz Masterman and Jane Alexen Shuyska present ongoing research into the use of technology by a selection of Masters students at the University of Oxford. Their research has focused on both the influence of demographic factors, and on the students' experiences of technology. Through a combination of surveys, interviews and 'pen-pal' correspondence, Masterman & Shuyska have elicited findings that highlight the limitations of students' technological engagement. They conclude that 'the onus for [technological] innovation in relation to pedagogy lies with the teachers.'

Monica Or (Chapter 6) relates her experiences at Westminster Kingsway College of developing distance learning materials on Blackboard in collaboration with stakeholders. Feedback from students on the Foundation Degree in Hospitality Management, which blends online and face-to-face teaching, has helped inform the development of online pedagogical materials for use by the Army as a wholly distance learning programme. Or's survey of stakeholder input, plus attention to good e-learning practice, has enhanced the learners' experience of using Blackboard and led to the dissemination of good practice throughout the College.

Anise Bullimore's paper (Chapter 7) discusses the importance of listening to both learners and tutors prior to redesigning courses at City University. A properly integrated listening rationale should help to implement course redesigns that combine engaging, flexible learning content with an enhanced sense of staff ownership.

In Chapter 8, Sandra Clarke reflects on how, in the context of a Land Law module, relatively simple web-based tools can have a big impact on both learning and teaching practice. The introduction of anonymous discussion threads yielded unexpected insights into students' experiences, and time-stamped WebCT research logs delivered valuable clues regarding students' research skills. These tools proved an excellent way of understanding students' learning and helped Clarke to reflect on, and adapt, her own teaching.

In their paper in Chapter 9, Helen Lyons et al. illustrate how feedback from undergraduate and postgraduate students has helped to inform university-wide strategic thinking on e-learning at Sheffield Hallam University. Amongst other consequences, staff have been encouraged to develop 'rationales' to explain the purpose of each Blackboard site and to outline the expectations of both students and tutors. Such an explicit rationale is important in explaining the purpose of going online, and also helps to define what blended learning is, as well as assisting in managing students' expectations.

At the University of Greenwich, Sarah Crofts et al. report in Chapter 10 how they surveyed students with regard to the Information and Library Service's *Progression in Information Skills* course and the library tour podcasts. Crofts et al. incorporated student feedback into the redesign of the resources, updating the content, layout and interactivity of the *Progression* course, and re-recording some podcasts in the light of user comments.

In Chapter 11, Paul Le Fevre and Joan Amos set out the work of the Flexible Learning Educational Support Service in East Sussex. A reassuring evaluation conducted with learners confirmed their approach and vindicated the way teaching assistants were used and the usability of the system. Le Fevre & Amos suggest that for these students, e-learning is very much an enabling technology for social learning which has the potential to have a significant impact on students' self-confidence and emotional well-being.

At Canterbury Christ Church University, Simon Starr et al. (Chapter 12) have been employing video to help record and disseminate the student voice on the subject of the Blackboard VLE at Foundation Level. Starr et al. believe that listening to the students' experience will prove a 'powerful driver for change in academic practice.' Video has also been used by Michaela Kingham et al. (Chapter 13) in the iBel project to capture and amplify the student voice, in a collaboration between the University of Greenwich and Dartford Grammar School (DGS). The data collected has provided valuable insights into the students' perception of learning design, which was broadly speaking in favour of a blended approach, and this has helped shape institutional strategy at DGS.

In Chapter 14, Liz Bennett and Cheryl Reynolds provide useful guidelines on the development of podcasts, and the successful integration of podcasting into a blended learning environment at the University of Huddersfield. The research of Bennett & Reynolds suggests that effective activities are not just about listening, and that podcasts can 'draw students into a dialogue about their learning'.

Lorna Burns details in Chapter 15 the successful trial of the LAMS learning design tool amongst adult ESOL learners at Barnet College. In particular, Burns focuses on the first-hand feedback garnered from students, which was overwhelmingly positive and has led to an extension of the LAMS trial at the College. In Chapter 16, Karen Guldberg and Jenny Mackness point to the dangers of drawing general conclusions about learning by listening to learners, unless due attention is given to the context in which the learning takes place. Guldberg & Mackness identify the importance of combining methods to gather data about the students' experience and adopt a multi-modal approach.

Christine Keenan and Becka Currant, in Chapter 17, describe the extensive research they have undertaken at Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford respectively into first year students' pre- and post-induction experiences. After listening carefully to many students, Keenan & Currant have developed tools specifically designed to engage

students both before and after their arrival at university, which build confidence, reduce anxiety and lead to a more integrated and successful transitional phase.

Roger Rees et al. (Chapter 18) provide insights into the problems of developing a Personal Learning Environment at Ravensbourne College. Rees et al. note the 'unsophisticated' expectations their learners hold of e-learning, provide a useful rationale for the use of a range of tools, and highlight the need to scaffold learners' approaches to both using technology and engaging with communities of practice.

In the final Chapter, Nigel Ecclesfield and Fred Garnett examine 'Policy Perspectives', in a paper that draws on Nigel Ecclesfield's closing keynote address to conference. The authors effectively summarise the latest Government strategy, *Harnessing Technology*, before building a powerful argument that suggests the policy is neither informed by practitioners nor by learners. Ecclesfield & Garnett's clarion call is for 'policy makers to work alongside educators as equals in the development of policy'.

Chapter 1: Learning from the Learners' Experiences

Rhona Sharpe
Oxford Brookes University

Opening the 2008 e-learning@greenwich conference, this keynote presentation summarised the findings of the JISC Learner Experiences projects and the Oxford Brookes HE Academy Pathfinder project. As this area of research has grown rapidly in the last few years, a vast amount of rich and valuable data is being produced that provides an insight into learners' experiences of e-learning. The findings from the JISC and Pathfinder projects show that learners are using a diverse and ever-changing array of institutional and personal technologies to support their study. Their experiences are complex and individual.

In asking 'How are we going to make sense of all this data?' I argue that in order for us to learn from learners' experiences we need conceptual accounts of these phenomena to help us make sense of our findings. I present constructs that may have some potential, including a classification of patterns in technology use arising from the Brookes Pathfinder project, and a developmental model for effective e-learners arising from the JISC Learner Experiences studies.

Background

Three years ago we wrote the Scoping Study for the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning programme (Sharpe, Benfield, Lessner, & DeCicco, 2005). The review synthesized the literature at the time on the student experience, drawing on more than 80 studies that had emphasised the learner voice. We found a lack of sufficient research taking the learner's perspective: most research was planned and written from the perspective of the tutor and/or the course. In summarizing the review, we noted that learners' experiences were dominated by issues of emotionality, time and online learning skills. However, within these generalizations were more complex individual differences: the ways e-learners coped with the emotionality of the online learning experiences, developed strategies for managing their own time, and conceived of and managed their

own learning. This masking of individual differences has always bothered me and I wanted to use this keynote to unpick this issue.

This Scoping Study helped to define the subsequent JISC programme of work, and since that time an enormous amount of work evaluating learner experiences has taken place. It has been fascinating to watch this research unfold. In the JISC Learner Experiences programme, we have talked of opening the door to the world of learners and we have published text and videos from learners 'in their own words' (JISC, 2007). Learners in Phase 1 of this programme told us about their use of the Internet as a primary source of information for study and brought to light a now well documented underworld of social networking (LXP: Conole, de Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2007; LEX: Creanor, Trinder, Gowan, & Howells, 2006).

As learners have allowed us in, they have shown us many examples of the pervasive and integrated technology use described in the LEX and LXP Phase 1 studies. The STROLL project at the University of Hertfordshire has produced study bedroom video diaries where learners talk about turning the computer on as soon as they wake up and being 'facebook addicts'. We can see learners discussing how they personalise their tools and resources and adapt personal technologies for study, such as by downloading podcasts or video recording lectures on their mobile phones.

Alongside these rich pictures of individual learners, there is data from surveys that puts these learners in context, locating them within the wider population. For example, the JISC/MORI student expectations survey found that 65% of the 500 16-18 year olds surveyed used social networking sites regularly in the first survey in June 2007; and up to 91% in the second survey, in May 2008, when the same students had arrived at university (JISC, 2008).

As well as the JISC funded research, many of the HE Academy's Pathfinder projects have had a focus on the learner experience. The ELESIG Pathfinder continuation project is being used by researchers to share their experiences. This now has over 200 members representing 36 projects after just a few months in operation, and the site has had over 1000 unique visitors. So we are now in a position where there is a great deal of research in progress, which is producing rich and personal stories from learners. In my role with the JISC Support and Synthesis project we are currently considering how to make sense of all this data. It feels like we are at a turning point.

While there are *some* generalisable findings, the most striking finding is that there are widely varying individual differences: the amount and type of use varies, as does, more interestingly I think, what learners think and feel about this. How can we learn from this? What recommendations can we make to institutions and teaching staff about the kinds of technology, and its uses, which have the potential to enhance the learner experience?

In this paper I look at ways in which we can learn from learners' experiences. That is, how do we *make sense of* our findings? How do we deal with the complexity?

Modelling the learner experience

The first phase of the JISC studies set out to find and speak to effective e-learners. Some of the videos produced for the *In Their Own Words* publication illustrate the characteristics of 'digital natives' or 'net generation' learners (e.g. Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001). We met Laura, who is competent in using technologies for leisure and is transferring this know-how to supporting her study, e.g. listening to podcasts of lectures on the bus. She uses the Internet to find information and transfers that to using her institutional VLE as her 'hub of learning'. She maintains contacts with her friends online through social networking sites and uses the contacts to support her study. She demonstrates how learners' expectations, beliefs and strategies towards education, combined with their personal access to technology, are changing their experience of learning. Laura illustrates the value of seeing the world, holistically, through the eyes of the learner[1].

When I show the video of Laura, people often comment that not all of their learners are like that. Other learners feel alienated from the institutional technologies they are offered, or see traditional face-to-face learning as the ultimate learning experience they are aiming for. The THEMA study at the Univeristy of Oxford is finding evidence of this diversity. Thema focuses on the experiences of students on taught Masters programmes. Within the 67 students who gave feedback on their experiences of using social software, there is a range of views represented. As we might expect, some students speak positively of their experiences of using Facebook to schedule social events and keep in touch with family and friends. Others even describe how they have set up a group for their study cohort to provide support and share course related resources. But for some it is 'a waste of time', 'very addicting' [sic] or only used under pressure from peers.

Clearly, capturing the diversity of learners' experiences is important. After all, teachers and institutions need to design for all learners, not just some of them. How do we explain these complex, sometimes contradictory findings? Maybe it would help to model different types of learners? We talked in Phase 1 about 'effective e-learners', and the Phase 2 projects have had the task of grappling with what this might mean. The University of Northampton's E4L project has attempted to identify 'effective communicators', defining these as those able to operate at Salmon's levels 3 and above (Salmon, 2004). The LEXDIS project at the University of Southampton talks about 'agile technology users', characterized by the ways they personalise their choice and use of tools.

In what other ways might learners and their behaviours be different? I have suggested previously that learners' experiences may be influenced by their understandings and

1 The video of Laura is on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsDAoD_TStQ

conceptions of the learning process, informed by their prior experiences and attitudes towards technology (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). The HEA-funded Pathfinder project at Oxford Brookes set out to examine such relationships more closely, influenced by the student learning research area that has been tackling the similar problem of modelling a complex area where both individual and contextual factors are likely to be playing a part (e.g. Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Ellis, Goodyear, O'Hara, & Prosser, 2007). The project was designed to enable us to find patterns and relationships between, for example, conceptions of learning and online media use.

Looking for patterns in learner behaviour

Part of the data collected for the Pathfinder project at Oxford Brookes were responses to a questionnaire distributed to 1200 students, representing at least 10% of undergraduates in each of the University's eight schools (Ramanau, Sharpe, & Benfield, 2008). The questionnaire comprised four sections:

A. Demographic profile;
B. Choices in accessing online resources and forms of interpersonal contact;
C. Patterns in online media use: how often do you do any of these 25 activities online?
D. Perceptions of learning: views on learner choice, learning community and self-regulation in learning.

The responses showed that, for instance, the most popular activities performed online were reading learning materials and accessing library resources, whereas the least frequent were virtual worlds and gaming (questionnaire Part C). However, the real interest here is not in the amounts or frequencies in a population of full-time undergraduates, but whether we can see any patterns in use. To explore patterns in online use, a principal component analysis with varimax rotation was employed. After examining the Scree Plot and eigenvalues a five-factor solution was deemed appropriate:

- Multimedia use (uploading multimedia, listen audio, watch video, share files);
- Pioneering (virtual worlds, social booking);
- Contributing (reading and contributing to blogs and wikis);
- Gaming (alone and with others);
- Accessing learning resources (provided by library, Brookes).

With the factors in place, we were able to relate them to the demographics in Section A and the conceptions of learning subscales in Section D. There were some expected results that gave us confidence in the validity of the five factors. As shown in Table 1, age was a strong predictor of online media usage (ANOVA tests for all the five factor-based scales were significant at the .001 level).

Age band	More likely	Less likely
17-19 years	Gaming	
20-25 years	Contributing Multimedia use	
25+ years	Access learning resources	Pioneering

Table 1. Relationship of age to the five patterns of online behaviours

There were also unexpected, more interesting results. School affiliation was a strong predictor of online media usage (ANOVA tests for all the five factor-based scales were significant at the .001 level). We saw, for example, that students from the School of Health and Social Care and School of Social Sciences and Law scored significantly higher on the 'accessing learning resources' scale than students from other schools. Students from Technology and Business scored higher on the 'gaming' and 'pioneering' scales than students from other schools. It is not clear at present whether these school differences are due to the discipline or to the course cohort, as the school groups did comprise largely of students from a few modules who completed the questionnaires within large lecture settings.

Year of study did not appear to be a predictor of student scores on the five factor-based scales, except that 'accessing learning resources' increased year on year. This developmental view is supported by our case study research, where we are seeing that learners' use of technology does change over time. Finally, we found that the five factors correlated with two of the 'perception of learning' subscales from Section D of the questionnaire: '[perceptions of] learning community' and 'use of peers', as shown in Table 2.

Perception of learning (section D subscale)	Positive correlations with online patterns of use (section C factors)
Learning community (CEQ)	Multimedia Contributing Accessing learning resources
Use of peers (MSLQ)	Multimedia Contributing Accessing learning resources Gaming

Table 2. Correlations of perceptions of learning with online patterns of use

There is further work to do in improving the questionnaire and testing it with new populations of students. However, for the moment these seem to be important findings. We have seen that the way in which learners use technologies is not simply due to their membership of a net generation. It is influenced by the way we teach and by what learners conceive the learning process to be. The JISC case study research is also beginning to show that the way in which learners use technology is still led by their tutors and the course/activity design (see E4L and PB-LXP projects particularly).

A developmental model

Some have gone as far as to suggest that there is a mismatch between the attitudes and practices of the 'Google Generation' and those required to be successful in further and higher education (UCL, 2008). If students' use of technologies is not sufficient for higher study when they reach us, and is influenced by context, then we need to take seriously our responsibilities to develop in students the skills and attitudes they need to learn online effectively.

A final construct that may help us is a developmental model of effective e-learning that Helen Beetham and I have been working on (Beetham, 2007; Sharpe, 2007). We have seen that in order for learners to be effective in learning in the digital age, they need to creatively appropriate technology in ways which support their study in different, often blended, situations. The model gives a structure for exploring the skills, strategies and aptitudes that we are seeing in the survey and case study data discussed above.

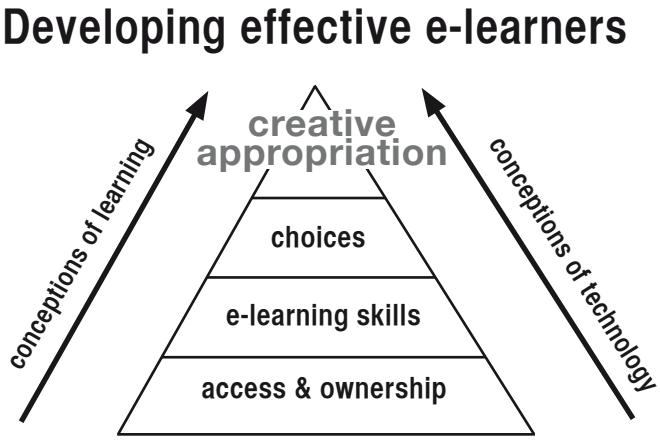

Figure 1. A developmental model of effective e-learning

For example, the model can be used to conceptualize learners' progress in using technology to manage the flexibility of learning. This is an issue that is often raised

as a potential benefit of online courses, but we know that only some learners manage the flexibility offered to the best effect (Sharpe et al., 2005; Sharpe et al., 2006). The LEX study found that learners talked extensively about the strategies they adopted to fit learning into their lives (Creanor et al., 2006). Technology has been promoted as providing anywhere, anytime access to online learning resources, but actually it is more complicated than that for learners. We have seen that flexibility for one person is another's organisational nightmare. Figure 2 shows the steps a learner needs to take in order to creatively appropriate technology in ways that help them to manage the flexibility in time and place of study.

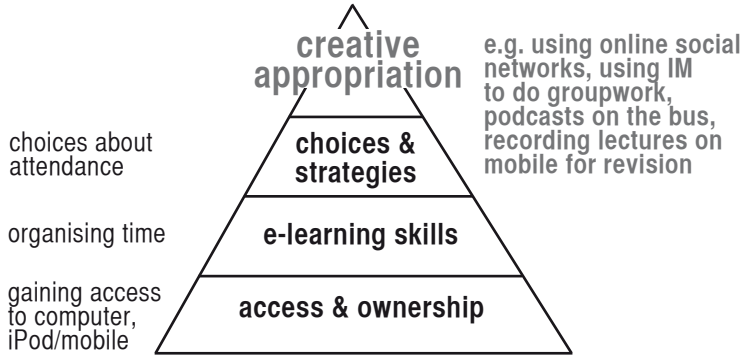

Figure 2. Managing flexibility effectively

In this case, examples of creative appropriation that we have seen emerging from learners themselves include: Laura's example of using her iPod to listen to podcasts as she travels to campus; students audio recording lectures on their mobile phones for each other and/or for playback later for revision; or students using social networks as illustrated in the quote from the LEX report below:

> *I had to leave early last week because my child minder was off …so I went onto the message board and asked for information about what I'd missed. People were kind enough to log on … and they let me know what groups I was in and what the presentation was about …*

In other words, this learner understands what s/he needs to learn, and has the skills and strategies to carry it through (Creanor et al., 2006, p. 18).

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen that there are wide individual differences in learners' experiences of learning in the digital age, and they are subject to change over time. For learners, it is not sufficient to be born into the net generation in order to make the best of technology enhanced learning. I have argued that such diversity can, in part, be explained by the learning context, and by learners' progress through a developmental model that includes their perceptions of learning with technology and the development of skills and strategies which allow them to creatively appropriate technology in useful ways.

Acknowledgements

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More details of the JISC Learner Experiences projects can be found at: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2

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Chapter 2: Nested Narratives at Greenwich

Roy Williams, Simone Gumtau & Regina Karousou
University of Portsmouth

Nested Narratives started life as a research project in late 2007, as part of the HEA e-Learning Research Observatory. This addressed the question: How do students make connections between their learning as individual actors and as part of academic and professional communities of practice? And how can this be expressed and articulated by the students, so their *voice* is represented to themselves, to researchers, and to others, with minimal bias from the research process? The *Affordances for Learning* research project explores student experience and widening participation issues with Foundation Degree students in a blended learning environment.

Background

This is the story, so far, of the *Affordances for Learning* project, and how it has now become the Nested Narratives project, following a visit to Greenwich to participate in the e-learning conference.

The problem identified by Mayes (2006:3, quoted in: Sharpe et al. 2005), which we wanted to avoid, is that the dominant research model is one of identifying input variables and then exploring their possible effects on learning outcomes as defined within the educational institution. This 'largely neglects a genuinely learner-centred perspective: [i.e.] that students'… motivation to learn is only understandable by looking at their lives holistically, and that technology is embedded in their social experience'.

1. Affordances for learning

A range of approaches was tried, including matrices, which used text, mind-maps, icons and graphics. These methods generated interesting data and analyses, but these techniques and media resulted, unsurprisingly, in a heavily mediated process and stories quite beyond the control of the learner.

What was needed was a more natural, intuitive way for students to describe the actual events that occurred during their learning. Listening to their stories in a 'conversational' setting was as close to this as we could get. We also wanted the method to provide information about how students make sense of their learning, from their own perspective.

In order to access the students' tacit knowledge of their learning, the research deliberately drew back from a number of specific themes that the students might use to describe their learning, or to second guess the researchers' expectations. So students are not asked to tell stories about:

- Their experience of particular technologies or processes, such as e-learning or VLE's;
- Their learning specifically within either educational institutions or at work;
- Their learning within formal settings, as opposed to informal encounters and networks;
- Their experience of learning online or face-to-face.

Instead, they are asked to tell stories about something they have learnt that is 'important to them as practitioners or professionals'. We don't presume an alignment between teaching and practice; we see what evidence emerges.

2. BNIM

We tried a number of approaches to get students to track their learning, and their use of resources: events, people and networked media, both inside the university and outside it – at home, at work, at leisure. We eventually focused on the BNIM (Biographical Narrative Interview Method), which we first came across at the Immersive Experiences conference at the University of Surrey in January 2008 (Sceptre 2008), and then with Margaret Volante and Tom Wengraf.

Based on our own early use of BNIM, and our participation in Margaret's research conversations at Surrey, we decided to use the first part of the BNIM method, which we are now calling 'Nested Narratives'.

3. Nested Narratives

In this method, specific research interests are kept in mind, so the research is not devoid of interests. But these are interests that are brought to the fore only on the students' own terms, within the sequence that they set in telling their story. We approach the story-telling process with interests, not questions, and we don't set the initial agenda, or even the general themes, apart from the overall framework of what is important to the students as they become practitioners – it is up to them to define what that means. This provides students with a supportive environment in which they can make sense of

how they learn, and of how they develop their identities as practitioners, with minimal interference from the researchers.

Narratives

The first part of the research process is to gather stories from students about how they learn. The methodology for this is adapted from the story-telling method for researching life stories developed by Tom Wengraf (the Biographical Narrative Interview Method, or BNIM). We call our approach 'Nested Narratives', as the aim is to find rich, empirical descriptions within the individual story spaces, and this can be done by exploring particular parts of the story.

The method that we developed and applied, prior to the Greenwich conference is derived directly from BNIM, and consists of two steps:

Step 1: Narrative

The facilitator sits down with the student, and asks them to tell a story about something important that they have learnt. Here is an extract from such a story (Figure 1):

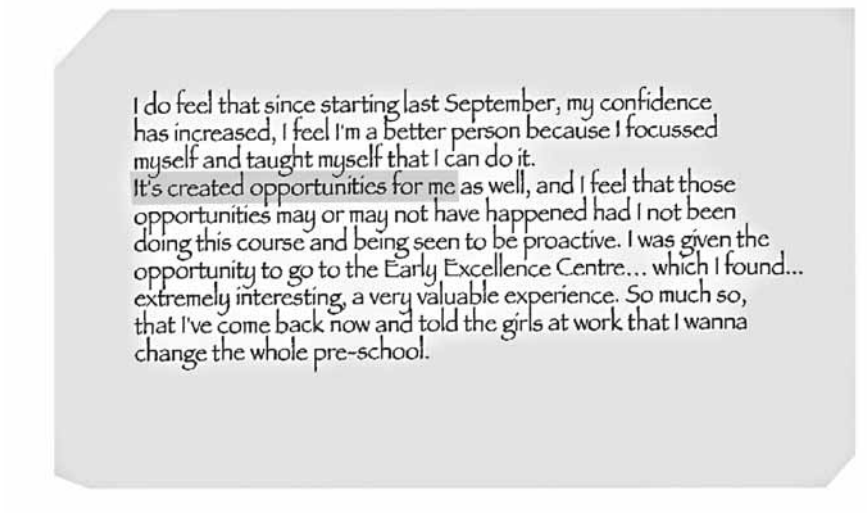
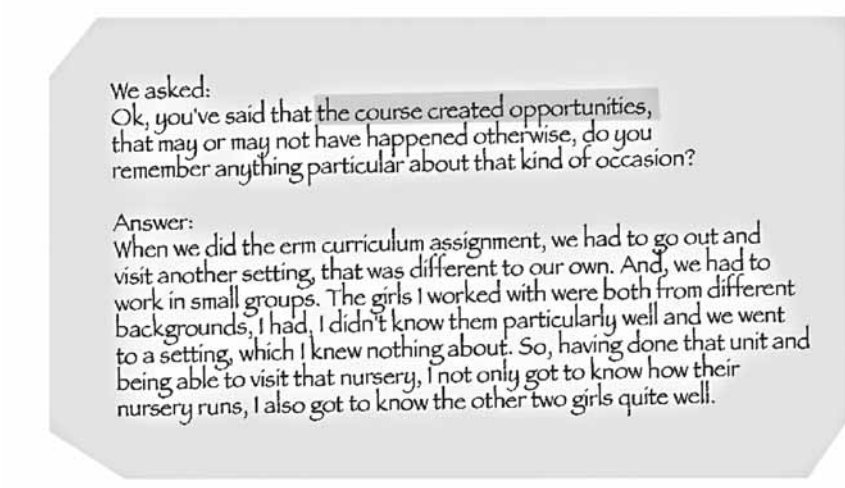

I do feel that since starting last September, my confidence has increased, I feel I'm a better person because I focussed myself and taught myself that I can do it.
It's created opportunities for me as well, and I feel that those opportunities may or may not have happened had I not been doing this course and being seen to be proactive. I was given the opportunity to go to the Early Excellence Centre... which I found... extremely interesting, a very valuable experience. So much so, that I've come back now and told the girls at work that I wanna change the whole pre-school.

Fig 1: Extract taken from Story 04

Step 2: Nested Narratives

Once the student has told their story, the researcher selects an exact phrase from the original story told (highlighted in Figure 1 and 2), and feeds it back to the student, with the aim of triggering particular incident memories and micro-narratives. This process builds up a story space, within which the student makes sense of their experience as

they explore the memories of actual events in their own mind, and finds ways to articulate the stories. It is a very specific version of 'facilitated' or 'stimulated' recall.


We asked:
Ok, you've said that the course created opportunities, that may or may not have happened otherwise, do you remember anything particular about that kind of occasion?

Answer:
When we did the erm curriculum assignment, we had to go out and visit another setting, that was different to our own. And, we had to work in small groups. The girls I worked with were both from different backgrounds, I had, I didn't know them particularly well and we went to a setting, which I knew nothing about. So, having done that unit and being able to visit that nursery, I not only got to know how their nursery runs, I also got to know the other two girls quite well.

Fig 2: Extract taken from Interview and Story 04

The researcher's question, as well as the student's response, are in Figure 2. The selected 'prompt' words are all words mentioned entirely within the student's voice, and within the sequence of the student's story. By rigorously keeping the story-telling within the student's story space, we are able to capture rich, empirical data about how students make sense of their learning. At this stage the student has explored, and started to articulate their tacit and explicit knowledge of their learning experience, and probably started to express some of their feelings towards what happened.

This process, which is not necessarily linear, was the basis for the subsequent development of Nested Narratives, and at this stage it included: explore, articulate, and express.

4. Greenwich

It was at this stage that we had a paper accepted for the e-learning conference at Greenwich. In our discussions about how we would present the project, we decided that rather than telling the audience about the project, we would try to let them experience the specific process of story-telling within Nested Narratives, which had yielded stories that were quite different from stories gathered from other interviewing or narrative methods, and much richer descriptions of learning.

G1

We outlined a very rough specification of what we thought might be useful: we wanted a way to explore and present the different segments of the story – the main narrative, and the derivative 'nested' narratives. We had also been discussing the possibility of enabling the story tellers to add other media texts to the stories: pictures, drawings, names, collages, or even videos.

This resulted in the Graphic User Interface (GUI) 'G1' (i.e. Greenwich #1), which we used for the presentation at Greenwich. We added a few pictures and drawings not selected by the student, but rather in lieu of what the student might select, given that there was insuffficient time to gather further student input at this stage.

The presentation was based on playing the audio segments of the initial conversation with the student, then the main story, and then some examples from the nested narratives. This worked as an 'experience' rather than an 'explanation' of what the project was doing, but only partially. Unfortunately, the sound quality in the room and on the sound system was poor, and there was also some audio interference on some of the stories, because they had been recorded in a room in which there were quite a few people telling stories!

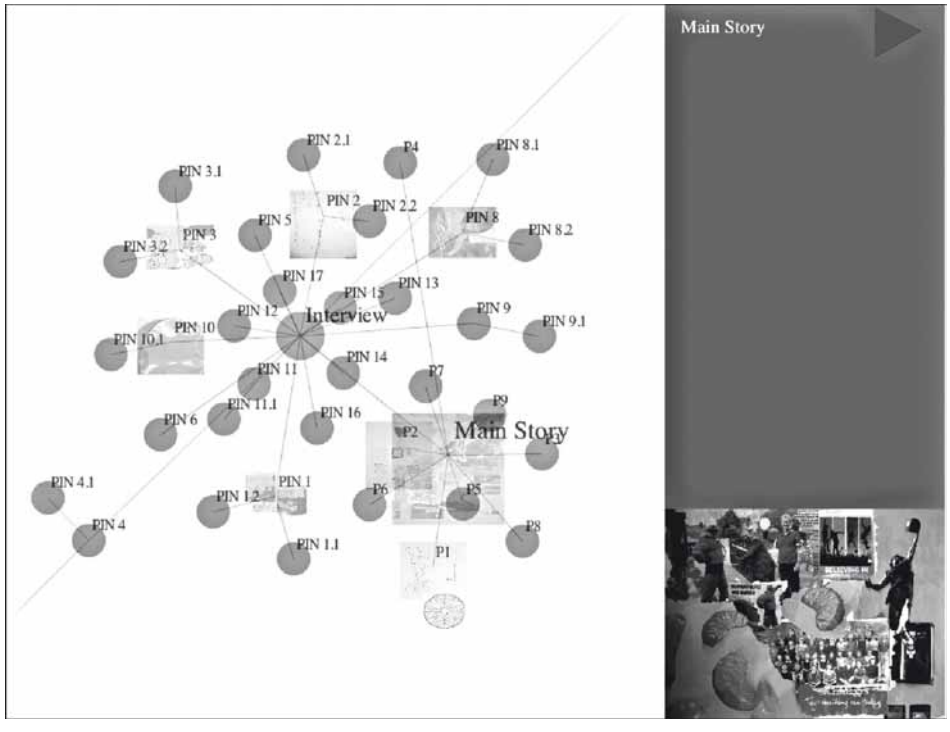


Figure 3: G1: Screenshot of Nested Narratives Multimodal Interface

In G1 (see Fig. 3), each bit of text is represented by a node in a visual network, on the left hand side of Figure 3, which has links and is flexible as the nodes can be pulled, pushed and clicked by using the mouse. Clicking on a node opens up the link to the transcript, and clicking on the arrow (top right in Figure 3) opens up and plays the audio track of that section of the transcript.

That provided a very 'rough' picture (in more than one sense) of the experience of story-telling. We then proceeded to talk about the project, and to explain what we were doing, and what we were trying to achieve. The visuals that we showed were, as indicated above, examples of the kind of thing that the student might add.

During the process of preparing the presentation for the conference we were going back to many earlier conversations that we had had in the project team, about how it would in principle be useful and interesting to extend the way the stories are told, the modes and media that could be used to do so, and more importantly, the potential for expressing and articulating tacit knowledge, feelings, associations – in short, to enrich the process of sense-making a whole lot further.

In and around the Greenwich conference a number of ideas that we had been thinking about for multi-modal sense-making suddenly started to come together, and to become 'real' and practicable. What started off as 'just a conference presentation' exercise, very soon turned into a major development for the project. G1 (and, hopefully, G2 and beyond) provides multimedia and multi-modal possibilities for sense-making, enabling both the learner and the researcher to explore - and to 'research' - sense-making into learning and identity. It starts to integrate learning with research, in a rich, practical and interesting way.

5. Multi-modal sense-making

What happened 'on the way to Greenwich' (and back) was the development and initial testing of an interface for multi-modal sense-making, which forms the basis for the work in the remainder of the project in 2008, as well as the basis for future projects that we hope will take this much further - possibly into applications in quite different fields as well.

Sense-making

This has enabled us to look back on the sense-making process, and the multi-modal possibilities that have emerged from G1. The revised approach to sense-making is based on a number of steps, which might follow a certain sequence or logic, but might equally take place simultaneously and in no particular order. We can now outline these steps more explicitly as:

- **Exploring** (what actually happened, in narratives and nested narratives – see below);
- **Articulating** (describing events, feelings, experiences, many of which are tacit, and emerge for the first time in the story-telling);
- **Expressing** (linking these descriptions to images, drawings, or other media forms);
- **Representing** (capturing and ordering these multi-media texts, in an interactive interface that can be the basis for conversations and exemplars);
- **Reflecting** (adding commentary about the descriptions and the expressions); and
- **Assimilating** (relating, ordering and contextualising what has been described, expressed and learnt).

We have found that, when students use images within their stories, they often reveal a particular epistemological stance: for example, their vision of their 'learning journey' could be a straight line, several convoluted lines, or even a labyrinth. They also reveal knowledge about their learning 'to themselves', as it were. To make this data useful and available to the student, we are developing G2, which will be more explicitly designed to provide value for both the researchers and the students. G2 is a tool similar to an e-portfolio, except that rather than being used directly for assessment or external monitoring, it is a means for students' self-discovery, reflection and sense-making.

Interface - design and functionality

The idea behind the interface is to enable students to produce digital rich media versions of their stories, allowing them to delve deeper into their story space, to create an artefact that they can take home and engage with at later stages. Enabling them to tell their stories and to engage with their story space in a multimedia format allows them to take ownership, not just of the artefact they create, but hopefully also of their learning experience and the process of sense-making. This enables them to reflect on and assimilate what they have explored, articulated, expressed and represented so far, although these different aspects are not discrete; they overlap and intersect, and happen in no particular order.

When the student finds or creates images to go with the selected text elements, this is more than an 'illustrative' function - we are actually looking for a new mode of expression, and new insights into sense-making outside language. Choosing or creating visuals could lead to unblocking further areas of implicit knowledge, which before had been difficult to access within the learner. Tacit knowledge is inherently difficult to verbalise, so to provide other ways of sensory expression, not bound to linguistic description, may free up channels into the knowledge we 'did not know we had'.

What happens here is much more than just a cognitive 'reflective' exercise, as the reflection overlaps with commentary, as well as with exploration, articulation and expression, and, ultimately, with assimilation into professional identity. It is this multi-pronged approach that enables the student to explore, and then articulate, tacit as well as explicit knowledge and feelings, and assimilate them into a sense-making gestalt, which is far more than an 'account' or a 'record' or even a 'benchmark statement'.

Once the student has added visuals and names to some - or all - of the segments, we can start a new conversation, in which they talk about choices they made in the process of creating G1. Talking about the artefact, and recording their live commentary on it, their meta-commentary, in which they justify and critically engage with their expressions in the artefact they have created, may result in further surprising discoveries. This returns to the 'start' of the process, and begins the whole cycle again, as the student who started off exploring their learning, is now exploring the artefact they have created about their experience of making sense of learning and identity.

We try, as far as possible, to keep the student voice intact as a gestalt, so the form that the creative activity takes has to be literally 'in the hands' of the participating students. Workshops will be offered in which image and media production skills are on hand to assist the students achieve an articulation and expression of their tacit understandings.

Example: learning journey

This is an extract, taken from a story told by one of the students participating in the project. Especially interesting here is the way she is using imagery within her language.

> *It's erm… more a learning journey, I think. From the moment I decided that I was going to do this course, I was very apprehensive as to whether I'd actually complete it.. I felt as though I was being pushed towards having to do it, because of my position at work and I wasn't actually sure whether I was capable of it.*

Fig 4: Extract from Story 04

This is the first paragraph from this student's story. According to the original Wengraf method (BNIM), the first thing mentioned within the sequence of the story is the most important thing. Interestingly, she begins hers by describing learning as a 'journey'. There are many ways to visualise a journey, and in the next step it would be interesting to see how the student would do this - it would give more insight into how she really thinks and feels about it. Would it be a straight line from A to B? Would it be a convoluted line, with paths branching off it? Or would it even be a labyrinth, where walking the path is more important than actually 'achieving a goal' and getting to the end?

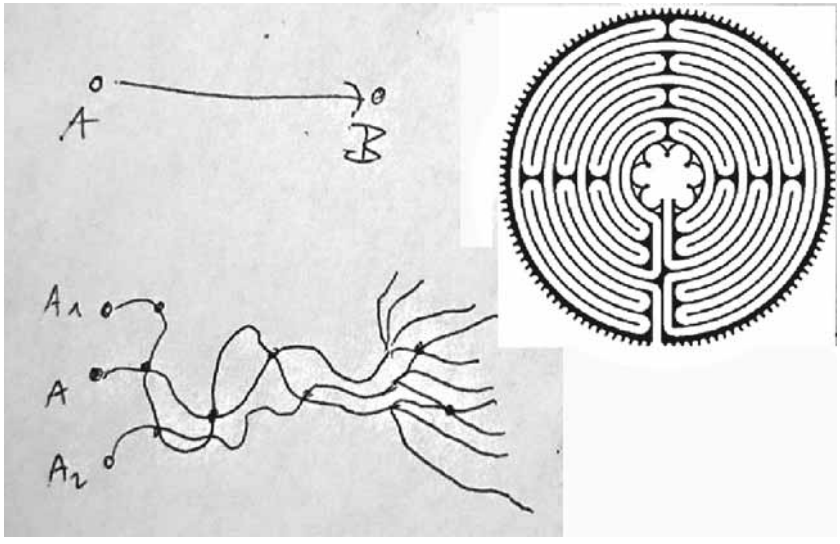


Fig 5: Possible visualisations of a learning journey/path

Conclusion

The process of research sometimes yields unexpected and surprising outcomes. 'Greenwich' in this case was the node at which this happened, as this paper has outlined.

The research started by developing a method that would enable the students to make their own sense of their learning and identity. In the process, an interface has emerged that will now enable that 'ownership' to continue after the researchers have packed up their tools and their reports, and this should enable sense-making to continue, as it should, for as long as the students find it useful.

The processes here are iterative (exploring, articulating, expressing, representing, reflecting, assimilating): they occur more than once, so they don't just 'repeat' – they occur in no particular order, and often occur simultaneously, because this is a process of sense-making, and not, primarily, a process of analysis.

In both research and meta-learning, the multi-modal possibilities allow for the linking and integration of cognitive, tacit, affective, cultural, personal, graphic and photographic ways of exploring, articulating, expressing and representing sense-making about learning and identity. This can open up and enrich the research process, as well as learning and sense-making, to take full account of the actual, complex, rich experiences of students attempting to persevere in Higher Education.

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Chapter 3: Student Consultations on Mobile Learning: Methods, Messages and Musings

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University of Leeds

The Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) CETL and the University of Leeds Medical School have used a variety of different consultation methods to investigate and improve students' experiences of e-learning and e-assessment. This paper compares results from two of these consultation methods. The first was a follow-up survey with medical students who were re-sitting part or all of their final year, who had used mobile devices in the form of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) for continued competency assessments. The second was a 'stakeholder consultation' workshop, which involved students, academic staff and service users (patients) giving feedback on the use of mobile devices as part of health and social care education for the ALPS programme. This paper explores the rationale for using a variety of methods to gain feedback from students. It will go on to examine how feedback from both of the studies was used to influence further mobile and e-learning programmes.

Student Consultations

The 'Med-Pilot' Project

The Med-Pilot Project consultations involved a focus group with students, followed by a questionnaire at the completion of a work based placement. The project itself, which was being used as a 'pilot' for the introduction of PDAs into final-year medical placement teaching, included 13 medical students who were re-sitting part of their final year, undertaking an intensive revision placement. During this placement the students were asked to complete a series of mini clinical examination (Mini-CEX) assessments,

using forms for completion on PDAs. Mini-CEX assessments are competency based assessments, usually used at postgraduate level to provide formative feedback on a variety of skills, such as communication, physical examination, practical skills and clinical reasoning (Holmboe, 2001). The students were each issued with a PDA, complete with the Mini-CEX assessment forms already loaded on to the devices. The students were given face-to-face training on how to use both the devices and the assessment forms, and asked to complete 20 assessments within their placement. They were told to gain Multi-Source Feedback (i.e. feedback from a number of professionals from different professions, depending on who they were working with on the placement) and were given guidance as to who to approach for this. A total of 197 assessments were completed by the 13 students.

A small group of five students was asked to review the PDA and the assessment form for ease of use prior to the commencement of the placement. After the placements had occurred, the format of using the PDAs on the placement was reviewed by academic staff and the re-sit students themselves. Twelve of the 13 students chose to give their feedback on the project. Involving the re-sit students in such a lot of the planning and implementation of the pilot project resulted in them having access to more tutor time than they would normally have received, which ultimately appeared beneficial for their own study. Engaging with the student voice in this manner therefore meant that both the students and the staff gained what they needed from the experience of using the PDAs in practice. The findings from this pilot stage were used to develop the study, which is now being repeated for the entire 5th year cohort of 270 medical students.

ALPS Stakeholder Consultation

The ALPS Stakeholder Consultation was comparatively exploratory in nature, taking place before any of the planned activity of the 'roll-out' of the ALPS programme had started. The specific part of the ALPS programme that was consulted on involves students using PDAs for ALPS-designed assessments whilst they are on practice placement. These assessments would involve students receiving feedback from their peers, practice assessors and service users, as well as engaging in self-reflection. In order to investigate the practicalities of doing this, representatives of all the stakeholder groups outlined above, plus some of the academics involved in creating the assessment tool, were invited to a workshop. Workshop participants were shown a scenario that acted out how the assessment process might work on the PDA. Participants were then split into focus groups (each group involved a mixture of stakeholders) to discuss how they felt about what they had seen, concerns they may have about using the PDAs for assessment processes and any suggestions for improvements. Ten students were involved in this consultation, meaning there were two in each focus group.

The rationale for the workshop was to 'open a dialogue' between all stakeholders, primarily regarding the use of PDAs in assessment. The ALPS programme required

feedback on the practical implementation of mobile assessment from those who would be using it, both in terms of giving and receiving assessments. This visual representation of the potential use of the PDAs most certainly stimulated debate, and the resulting discussions picked up procedural details that may not otherwise have been identified.

Ethical approval for these studies was gained from University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University respectively. No incentives were offered to the students involved in either the Med-Pilot project or the ALPS Stakeholder Consultation, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

ALPS Simulation Exercise

Students were then invited to a 'simulation exercise' for the ALPS assessment tool. They were handed a PDA with an assessment tool loaded onto it, and were given a few minutes to familiarise themselves with it, before being asked to role-play a scenario with a service user. Both service users and students then tested the assessment tool in 'real-time', after which they were asked for feedback in terms of the functionality of the PDAs and the usability of the assessment tools. Initially five students had volunteered to do this, but on the day only two came to give us their opinions.

Impact and findings

The main findings from the medical student consultation resulted in significant changes, both in terms of the e-assessment programme of work and the methods of evaluation used to gather student feedback.

The Med-Pilot project, as implied by its title, was always intended to be a pilot for the main aim, which was to give all fifth year medical students access to PDAs with the Mini-CEX assessments. There were, therefore, a number of issues, which emerged from the student consultations on the Med-Pilot, that resulted in changes to the main programme.

The students involved in this project shared their experiences with us via an open-ended questionnaire and focus group. In this manner we received feedback from 12 of the 13 students, from which a number of helpful suggestions were implemented for the second phase of the project. Students' suggestions were mainly practical considerations, such as how best to use the device and the structure of the project; however, a small number were more philosophical in nature, encompassing the whole experience.

Of the practical suggestions we received, seven of the students commented that they felt 'pressured' by the number of assessments they had to complete (the average number of assessments completed by each student was 15). Subsequently, the number of completed assessments required from the students was reduced in the second phase from 20 to 10. One student commented:

> *My suggestion would be to keep the format simple and the number of assessments reasonable.*

Additionally, three of the students reported that filling in the assessments on the PDAs was time-consuming and could be rather 'fiddly'. We therefore asked the second phase of students to use the audio function to collect feedback, thus saving time and effort for student and assessor alike.

Overall, all the students involved in the Med-Pilot found the assessments helpful in preparing for finals. Many commented that they had received more feedback in general, and more focused feedback in particular. Another student commented:

> *I have really enjoyed this placement. As compared to other placements I think I had a clearer sense of my goals and what I wanted to achieve. I really felt supported by people on the team and felt learning opportunities were made easily available.*

Arguably the largest impact student the consultation had during the Med-Pilot project was the project expansion, whereby the entire fifth year undertook PDA assessments during placement the following academic year. The pilot was seen as a success – both in terms of the number of assessments the students completed (197), and also because the assessment feedback scores for the students improved as the placements continued.

The process for evaluating the use of Mini-CEX assessments on the PDA was itself revised, as after the first phase of student consultation we found we had a lot of usable and useful qualitative comments but were unable to quantify the students' thoughts in terms of the usefulness and usability of the devices. Therefore we added further structure to the evaluation questionnaire in the follow up study.

The feedback from students attending the ALPS stakeholder workshop was similarly pivotal in shaping future implementation. Ten students gave their feedback at the workshop. Echoing the medicine pilot findings, most students' suggestions were around how best to use the device, while others were more thoughtful. In practical terms the suggestions received from students were that the students would like to alter some of the wording of the assessment tools:

> *The assessment is usable although I feel the wording needs to be altered. The questions were appropriate – the multiple choice answers need to be decreased as they are too broad.*

They also requested a variety of rating scales on the assessment tool – i.e. some pictorial, some numerical and some free text, so that they could use their judgement to

choose the most appropriate for each individual service user. The students were also keen to use the multi-media functions of the PDA within assessment, as they too found the option of free typing 'fiddly' and thought it would prove to be too time consuming.

In broader terms, the students were cautiously enthusiastic about using the PDAs, but voiced concerns over other aspects of the programme: for example, whether service user assessment would be valid and how students would be supported when receiving feedback. One student noted:

> *If the patient wanted to say something negative…then how does that student respond to that? And who's going to support that student to deal with that afterwards?*

The language used in the assessment tool was reviewed thoroughly after students had 'had a go' at using the tool. Statements that were written in planning meetings for use in the tool were sometimes awkward, and we found that students (and assessors) naturally paraphrased where this occurred. We therefore changed some of the language in the assessment tool (in consultation with assessors to ensure it was still appropriate) as a result of our consultations.

Practical issues such as whether to hand the mobile devices over to assessors or service users during assessments, or whether to fill in boxes for them, were also discussed in consultations. As a result of these discussions, ALPS was able to produce a protocol for device use and a set of practical guidance on using the device in a practice setting.

All the students involved in focus groups felt that training for assessors and students was important. This is something we have ensured is available to all ALPS students and assessor representatives when distributing PDAs. The students wanted to use audio and other multi-media files for assessment, so an e-portfolio system, 'Multiport', was created to provide a personal repository for each student.

The stakeholder workshop consultations were so useful in terms of the learning gained by the project team that further consultations were planned and used as appropriate. The stakeholder feedback therefore proved itself invaluable in terms of the development of the ALPS assessment tools.

Reflections on peer experiences

During our presentation at the conference several others shared their experiences of student consultation with us. Many of these experiences were common to the group. One participant observed that, in his experience, it was difficult to engage students in curriculum development without sizable incentives, in contrast to our own experience where students told us they found incentives 'demeaning'. This widened the debate

to different university policies on incentives. Some participants in the room used them frequently, while others were not allowed to offer anything at all. There was common agreement that students can be over-surveyed and that there are no 'rules' for effective engagement; what works for one university, or indeed department, may not work for another.

Following our return from the conference, we began to wonder over student engagement: why it is that some students can be almost impossible to engage, while others are over-enthusiastic. We conjecture that the answers lie in the life experience of the students. Some students come to university to get the best degree they can as a means to finding an appropriately impressive job, while others come for the life experiences university offers, seeing the degree as a happy additional outcome.

Underlying both of these issues is the change in thinking demanded at undergraduate level. Many students have been 'taught' at school in a curriculum as product style (Tyler, 1949), delivering knowledge to students, whereas a subtle move toward curriculum as process (Stenhouse, 1975; Grundy, 1987) is introduced at this level. The student has more of an active role in their own learning, and must engage with core concepts in a critical manner. This is mirrored in their transition from learning as children to learning as adults, moving from pedagogy to andragogy (Knowles, 1990). Many students find this hard; and so the added pressure of shaping their own learning, as well as thinking critically, can prove a step too far for some.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, from a student involvement viewpoint, we found that involving students from the first available opportunity resulted in very similar feedback to that of piloting a study and then asking for comments. Additionally, many students expressed a preference to be involved in consultation from the outset. Although this would allow students to be involved in shaping their own programme of learning, we recognise that this is not always a feasible option given that sometimes students are working from the first stage of the conscious competence learning model (i.e. they do not know what they need to know, or do not appreciate the value of what they may need to know, or believe they are well informed when they are not (Howell, 1982)).

However, we did find all the student consultations discussed here both rewarding and useful, and provided that consultation is carried out mindful of its appropriateness then we would recommend 'learning from the learners' experience' to all in curriculum development.

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Chapter 4: Enabling Learners' Voices

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This paper reflects upon the authors' experiences of the conference and also discusses their experiences eliciting information from learners. Both E4L and LexDis are projects from the phase two JISC-funded Learner Experiences of e-Learning. Although various methodologies were employed, both used interviews as a primary source. This paper discusses some of their experiences of using interviews as a method, particularly in gathering data on the learner experience. The use of 'Interview Plus' is also explained and discussed with reference to how the two projects used it.

Introduction

The theme of this year's Greenwich conference – learning from the learners' experience – highlights the importance of what has previously been an under-developed and under-researched area. Learners' voices were more like whispers and their experiences and opinions were not heard by the wider community. As researchers who have been involved in projects that have given learners a platform for their views, we have come to understand the necessity of listening to learners, and how doing so creates a better educational experience for learners and teachers alike.

Background

Most post-secondary students are now expected to experience the use of e-learning with browser-accessible teaching and learning materials at some stage during their courses. These materials may be made up of documents, presentations and multimedia items such as podcasts, videos etc. Prensky (2001) and Oblinger (2003) state that students of today are 'digital natives' of the 'net generation' who expect the integrated use of technology as part of their university learning experience. This was borne out by a comment from one of the LexDis students:

> *Last year I struggled with hearing the content in lectures as they are in very large rooms with bad acoustics... Learning materials that are needed do not just extend to lecture slides. Valuable materials include podcasts, PowerPoints, the use of blackboard, discussion boards and many more. The fact that the majority of people under the age of 25 are computer literate shows exactly why lecturers should be taking full advantage of this ability most of us possess.*

The JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) has instigated a series of research projects to explore the 'Learner Experiences of e-Learning'. In Phase One of the research programme, studies including the Learner Scoping Study, LEX and LearnerXP revealed that effective e-learners are flexible, resourceful, self-aware and highly motivated (JISC, 2007).

Sharpe et al. (2006) noted, whilst reviewing 'The Undergraduate Experience of Blended e-Learning', that 'student response is overwhelmingly positive to the provision of online course information to supplement traditional teaching'. Those taking part in the LexDis project all said they benefited from the use of online learning materials provided by academic staff.

Projects background

The LexDis project has explored the e-learning experiences of thirty disabled students taking a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses at the University of Southampton during 2007/2008. The aim was to enhance understanding of the many issues that arise when students, who may depend on the use of assistive technologies, collaborate and interact with online teaching and learning materials. We have collected the strategies used by the disabled students and developed a database of resources to provide hints and tips for other students, along with guides for staff and a knowledge base of technologies used by the students.

The E4L project has been investigating learners' opinions and experiences about e-learning from adult and community learning, further and higher education, focusing in particular on two core themes of their transitional periods: the use of 'shadow technologies' (technologies they use alongside those provided by their institution); and 'light bulb moments' (moments of inspiration when using technology for learning).

The use of recorded semi-structured interviews, and the techniques used within them, have been particularly successful in eliciting the data from students. These interviews have since been followed up with questionnaires and the continued use of a dedicated area within the institutional Virtual Learning Environment. The recorded information

from the interviews is particularly valuable, as it is being transformed into themed and categorised interactive case studies open to public viewing and reflections[1].

Interview Plus method

Both E4L and LexDis used interviews as a method to gather data, and both also employed Interview Plus, an approach that was successfully used in one of the phase one LEX studies. Mayes (2006) describes the Interview Plus method in the JISC Lex methodology report, 'where the 'plus' represents some artefact or activity chosen to guide recall or aid thinking aloud'. Examples included:

- The learner's own diary kept for the research study, or course-related learning log;
- Observation, e.g. the interviewer sitting with students as they logged on and asking them questions about their intentions and perceptions in real time;
- Learners' progress files;
- Students' work;
- Tracking, monitoring data from a VLE - for example, showing login times and durations to elicit information about online behaviours.

In the case of the LexDis project, it soon became apparent that during the case study interviews students were willing to show how they used their personal and learning technologies. They either brought in laptops, mobile phones and PDAs, or used the interviewer's laptop to illustrate how they worked with learning resources, collaborative applications and assistive technologies. The artefacts that developed over the course of the project were usually the result of discussions during the interview, or were sent via e-mail, MSN and Skype.

E4L encouraged the students to create their own personal educational flowcharts (PEFs), which included not only their educational history but the technologies they used at each stage. These were then discussed during the interviews and supplemented with product cards to elicit further information about other technologies they may have used. This proved to be successful and helped the students to focus on the themes of the interview as well as providing them with something different to do in the interview. Some students reported after the interview that they particularly enjoyed the card sorting, as they felt it was more like a game and made the interview seem less daunting. It also allows the student to reflect on what they are talking about and makes silences less intimidating for them if they have something to focus on.

Although 'Interview Plus' can be a successful method to gather more data, there are certain things that need to be taken into account. The first is that the researcher

1 See www.northampton.ac.uk/e4l/ics

needs to understand and appreciate the context in which the artefacts were created and the implications of them. For example, with E4L's PEFs the researcher required an understanding of the students' different educational backgrounds. Similarly, with the LexDis project, an understanding of the different technologies being shown was an advantage. Time is also needed, preferably before the interview, to go through the artefact that the learner has created or offered. If artefacts are hand-drawn/written, then interviewers need to be able to decipher what is offered - sometimes artefacts can be very difficult to interpret.

Interview techniques

All of the JISC Learner Experience projects were provided with a Learner Profile questionnaire that would capture data regarding online learning and personal technology experiences across the sector. During phase one, the LexDis team asked students about the questions, and it became apparent that several were misconstrued, whilst others did not necessarily provide answers that would indicate students' skills in the use of assistive and e-learning technologies. The questions were therefore only ever asked during a face-to-face interview and supplemented with more probing questions on assistive technology use. E4L used the basic learner profile, but added further questions during the sampling process of the students. The interviews were recorded with the student's permission and transcribed in both cases. Digital recorders were used in both the projects and it is recommended that you use one which has a USB connector to make data transfer to a computer easier.

The data accumulated has provided a rich collection of issues and strategies that have been made available as a searchable, database driven website for LexDis. For E4L the videoed interviews have been clipped, themed and categorised, and are available for viewing with recommended clips for students, practitioners, developers and management. Because the interviews were recorded and the data used in this way, comprehensive permission forms were completed by the students before the interviews, and these were reviewed and re-checked by both the researcher and student on the day.

Throughout the interviews several techniques, including the use of artefacts, were employed to help the students feel at ease, and to encourage participation in the discussion. The use of technologies often helped elaboration with demonstrations of phone use or mind mapping etc. If the conversation slowed, verbal prompts were used with open-ended questions such as:

I'm interested in hearing about . . .

I'm curious to learn . . .

Would you share with me . . .

At other times there may be the need for 'negative confirmation'. This tended to happen when details that may cause concern required some clarification. In this case one might say – 'That's interesting… Can we chat about another time you had to…' Or there were times when 'mirror statements' were used, almost repeating what the student said to allow her/him time to explain the situation more fully. Seconds of silence can often achieve the same effect but most importantly it is the ability to put the student at ease and make the experience enjoyable.

During the project the participatory methods resulted in an amazing amount of commitment from the students with comments such as:

> *Also, as we agreed before, feel free to e-mail me about any other things that we could/should still sort out re the LEXDIS project.*
>
> *If you need any further assistance from me please do not hesitate to get in touch and I will do whatever I can. I sincerely hope the project is going as well as you hoped.*

After checking her transcript one student said:

> *Everything looks good from what I have read, seems a bit silly really to read what has been spoken! I am pretty busy at the moment as have a lot of work to do and so little time but when I am free maybe in two weeks or so I will email you so we can meet up. Is that alright?*
>
> *I'd love to help more, just let me know if I can.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to offer some pointers for a successful outcome to an interview:

- Develop a repertoire of questions with a pilot study to check their meaning for the participants whilst also being in line with the research;
- Prepare a 'plan sheet' that lists the required significant information that will answer research questions;
- Prepare a checklist of items that might be suitable for the Interview Plus techniques;
- Learn how to listen to what the interviewee is really telling you. Don't try to formulate your next question while half-heartedly listening.
- Take discreet notes and recordings during, and immediately after, the session - do not make it so obvious that the participant has to work around the note taking. Try to type up and make sense of notes as soon as possible after the interview;

- Sometimes it can be difficult not to speak to avoid long silences. These can be golden as the interviewee often elaborates on what they have said before - but learn when to make sure these are not awkward silences.;
- Try not to use jargon terminology, and be careful how you structure not only questions but phrases. For example, what the E4L project found most beneficial was to ask the students about 'what technology they used when they learnt' rather than 'what e-learning tools they used', as this opened up a broader spectrum of technology;
- Go for the human approach – not necessarily being overly friendly but neither aloof. The best results were gathered because contact had been made with students before the interviews and, in the case of LexDis, chats were held beforehand. Provide a nice, comfortable, relaxed setting so that interviewees will not feel intimidated and will be more responsive with their answers. Allow extra time when planning the interview, as they often do not run to time, and then you are also not rushing the interviewee. Food and drink are always good to help provide a more relaxed atmosphere and make the interviews seem more like a chat than a formal interview. If you are providing food and drink, check with the interviewees whether they have any dietary requirements;
- Don't forget to thank the interviewee - and mean it as well, as they've given up their time to help.

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Chapter 5: Masters of the Digital Age?

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University of Oxford

In this chapter we summarise work in progress on a study of the experiences of taught postgraduate students and the implications for scaffolding teachers' engagement with technology.

Overview

The Thema project forms part of JISC's Learner Experiences of e-Learning programme, Phase 2. It is exploring how students use digital technologies in their academic and social lives, and is currently tracking the experiences of 76 Masters students from a range of full-time and part-time courses at Oxford University. This will result in a small number of case studies, which will be contextualised within broader surveys, yielding more quantitative data.

Data already gathered suggest that culture and the previous educational system of Masters students may have bearings on their overall experience of learning, as well as on their perception of the institutional provision of technology at Oxford. Moreover, although the great majority of students are adept in their use of technology, the extent to which they spontaneously use newer tools such as Web 2.0 to support and manage their learning is less certain.

How the outcomes of Thema and related research might be integrated into staff training and development programmes, potentially through pedagogy planner tools, is a fruitful area for future research.

Context

The Thema project is following the experiences of 76 Masters students on taught full-time (one-year) and part-time (two-year) programmes in the Departments of Education, Medical Sciences and Continuing Education at Oxford University from October 2007 to September 2008. The full-time programmes are face-to-face and mediated by technology, primarily the institutional VLE. One of the part-time programmes is face-to-face with fortnightly meetings, and makes extensive use of digital technologies for archaeology, while the other is an online course with two summer schools in Oxford.

We believe that taught Masters students are of interest in that they tend to be older than undergraduates, to have taken a substantial gap in their studies, to be non-native English speakers and to have work and/or domestic commitments in addition to their studies. Statistical analysis of data from a preliminary 'snapshot' survey of students across the University demonstrated that taught Masters students do differ significantly from undergraduates along demographic lines, although there may be little difference in terms of their disposition towards, and use of, digital technologies. Therefore we feel that, while taught Masters students' experience of learning may be distinctive, we might be able to generalise their use of technology to the broader student population.

Research rationale

Our research has a twofold focus:

a) The influence of the demographic factors identified above on students' experience of studying as a whole.

b) Students' experience of technology in their learning, specifically:
   i) The choices that students make in their study strategies and the role of technology in supporting these;
   ii) Changes in their use of technology during the course;
   iii) The 'significant moments' in students' experience – e.g. induction into the course and the University's social life, group projects, revision, or researching and writing their dissertations – and the part that technology plays in these;
   iv) Characteristics of the 'effective' use of technology in learning, and whether these can be used to inform the study strategies of undergraduate students.

At the heart of the project are 10-12 case studies of students' experience of learning in an age of digital technology. These qualitative accounts are contextualised within two, primarily quantitative, online surveys of a larger sample of students (including the case-study contributors) on the selected programmes:

i) An initial survey at the start of the course, eliciting data on students' existing use of technology, and their expectations and intentions regarding the course and the role of technology in it.

ii) A 'reflective' online survey after the end of the taught component of the course, capturing participants' experiences, their use of the tools and the extent to which their expectations and intentions have been realised. (In the case of the part-time students, the reflective survey is being carried out 9-10 months after the first.)

Data for the case studies themselves are being collected through:

i) The two 'contextualising' online surveys;
ii) Formative written contributions elicited through a 'pen-pal' email correspondence 3-4 times during the first 7-8 months of the course; and
iii) Summative interviews conducted while the students are working on their dissertation.

The 'pen-pal' method of data collection, a variant of the e-interview (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; James, 2007), has been developed, in part, to address the risk of attrition among participants. It operates on the principle that sustained participation will be maximised by adopting a personalised approach: i.e. one that involves both individualised messages from a single named researcher throughout, and questions that take the student's specific course and own individual experience as a starting point, in addition to common questions which are put to all the pen-pals.

Initial findings

Preliminary analysis of the initial survey and three rounds of 'pen-pal' correspondence has yielded a number of provisional findings.

Students' experience – at least, initially – can be substantially affected by demographic factors. Non-native English speakers encounter difficulties with reading materials, and students from countries where the 'information transmission' model predominates may take time to adjust to small-group learning and the emphasis on analytical thinking. We also found that, while students may be ahead of teachers in their use of technology, they can also be conservative in the kinds of pedagogy that they appreciate: for example, some did not appreciate formal peer-support groups or collaborative activities such as problem-based learning.

In relation to technology, although most students appear to arrive in Oxford reasonably adept in their use of technology (e.g. over 90% have laptops), a small minority do not, and with heavy workloads lack the time to learn even essential tools such as Powerpoint and Excel.

Attitudes vary widely towards the uploading of lecture notes and Powerpoint presentations to the VLE, and the podcasting of lectures, according to students' individual preferences: whether they like to take their own notes, whether they like to listen again to lectures as part of their revision, and so forth.

Use of Web 2.0 centres on Facebook, but peer-support groups set up early in the courses (e.g. for exchanging resources) had degenerated into purely social groups by the second term. Low usage of online calendars, social bookmarking and RSS suggests a low awareness of the potential role of Web 2.0 in managing their learning.

The country from which students come may influence their reaction to the institutional provision of technology. For example, US students used to blanket wireless coverage back home, struggled with the incomplete coverage of the Oxford network, while those from developing countries are more likely to be content with the facilities available.

Impact on practice

Course directors have indicated their interest in the outcomes of Thema, and we will be reporting to them individually as well as collectively. Ultimately, the impact of the project will depend on teachers' willingness to experiment not only with technology, but also with their pedagogy (both as part and parcel of engaging with technology, and in addressing those problems raised by learners that are independent of technology).

This also requires support at the institutional level, which, given Oxford's devolved collegiate structure, may pose more challenges than in smaller, more centralised universities. From its base in the Learning Technologies Group at Oxford University Computing Services, the project team is in a strong position to promote e-learning outreach activities with academic staff.

Future research

While teachers can learn from students about the kinds of technologies and specific uses thereof that they find motivating, the onus for innovation in relation to pedagogy lies with the teachers, even if that innovation will eventually involve the co-design of learning experiences with students. We therefore need to investigate practical and efficient ways in which teachers can capitalise on the fruits of learner experience research: for example, within the context of training and development programmes potentially supported by pedagogy planner tools in which those fruits are embedded.

This aspect of our work will go beyond the immediate context of Oxford University and the remit of the Thema project. It is looking for ways to knit together the outcomes from Thema and related learner experience research with the fruits of the first author's work on tools for scaffolding teachers' engagement in e-learning (Masterman, 2008a; 2008b).

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Chapter 6: Multiple Perspectives on Using Blackboard

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This paper will explore the experiences of using Blackboard as a Virtual Learning Environment from the perspectives of a student, a teacher and a developer.

At Westminster Kingsway College Blackboard has been used for the past six years, initially as a tool to upload materials and resources for students to refer to. However, as programmes have been developed, so has the use of Blackboard within the college.

As the Foundation Degree qualification is now gaining recognition from both employers and students, Westminster Kingsway College has been approached by several large employers such as Travelodge and the Army to develop Foundation Degrees for them. Since the students on these programmes are from widely dispersed geographical areas, the programmes run have been adapted to suit the students' needs. The Foundation Degree in Hospitality Management is currently being run for Travelodge on a block release basis. This is now being developed further for the Army to become a distance learning programme.

In order to explore new ways of using technology in meeting the diverse needs of both Travelodge and the Army, the courses are now moving from a blended approach to learning, to developing materials and resources for total online usage.

Background

To find out the perspectives of students, teachers and developers, some primary research was carried out. Questionnaires were sent to both students and teachers to gain their feedback on how they currently use Blackboard. Discussion forums were also set up for the students to use.

Several of the lecturers who have had more experience of developing materials for online usage, formed a focus group. They looked at how to move from using Blackboard with a blended approach, to developing totally online materials, taking into account the student and teacher feedback.

Getting to grips with Blackboard – teacher viewpoint

Blackboard is being used by all lecturers with the various cohorts on the Foundation Degree in Hospitality Management programmes: full time, day release and block release. Lecturers currently upload their lesson notes and resources on to Blackboard prior to seeing the students for face-to-face sessions. Generally, this is in the format of a Powerpoint presentation or word documents. Students are required to download these materials from the site prior to their lesson.

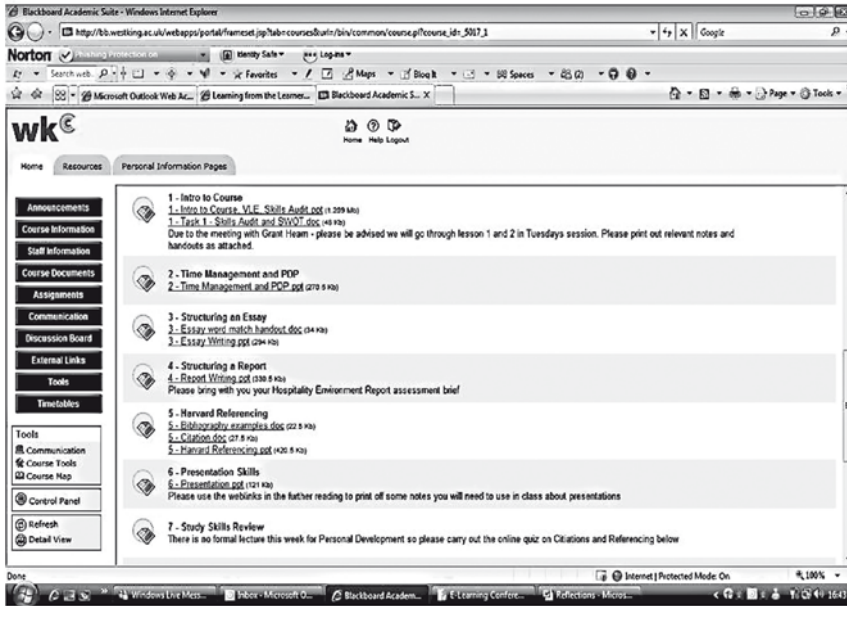

Figure 1. Course Documents – Lesson notes for students to download

All students are required to submit their assignments electronically, and these are marked online by their lecturers, through use of the grade book facility.

This is currently the way in which Blackboard is used. Some lecturers have set up discussion boards and encourage their students to use these to support one another when off-site. Several online quizzes have also been set up, although there are a host of facilities that have not been utilised by the lecturers - features such as wikis, blogs, chat rooms and videos, to name but a few. The questionnaires clearly highlighted that lecturers needed more training on how to use Blackboard to be able to use it in a more integrated way.

Getting interactive with Blackboard – student viewpoint

Blackboard as a VLE has been very well received by the students, who consider it to be a useful tool to receive and share information. Students have found it easy to use once they have learnt how to get around the various menus, and believe it aids them with their learning. The students seem to get most benefit from the site when their lecturers have everything prepared in advance and set up for them. As one student put it: 'The whole Blackboard thing [is] really easy to use. If only there was something like this around when I went to school I may have stayed on for A-levels!'

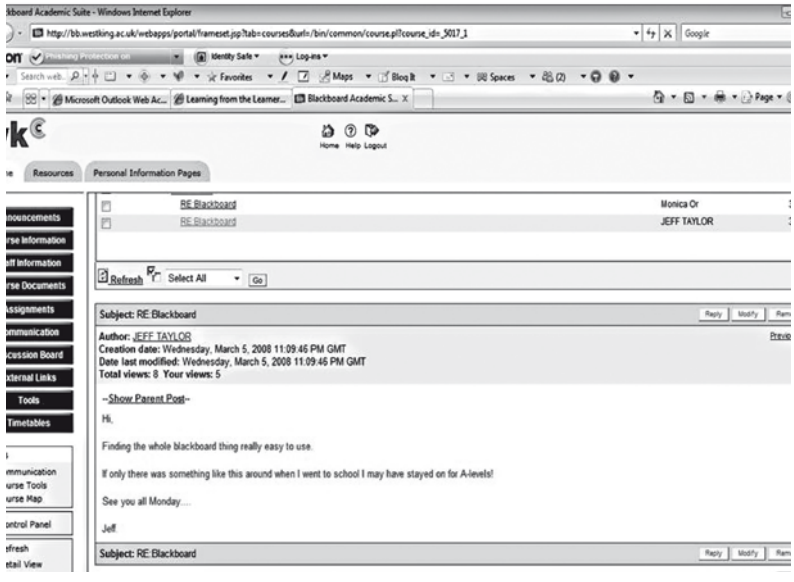

Figure 2. Student post on Discussion Board set up about Blackboard

Points that students like about Blackboard include:

- Having lesson notes in advance of lectures - students like being able to plan their learning;
- Submitting assignments online – students think this is a very efficient way of working;
- Gaining feedback online – students like having their work marked online and being able to retrieve it via the grade book.

With the Travelodge cohort of students, more use has been made of discussion forums and blogs, which help them to reflect on their learning.

So far, the way in which Blackboard is being used still requires the lecturer to explain lesson content to the student. However, for total online usage Blackboard has to be used in a different way, so the student is able to navigate around and interact with Blackboard independently, both synchronously and asynchronously.

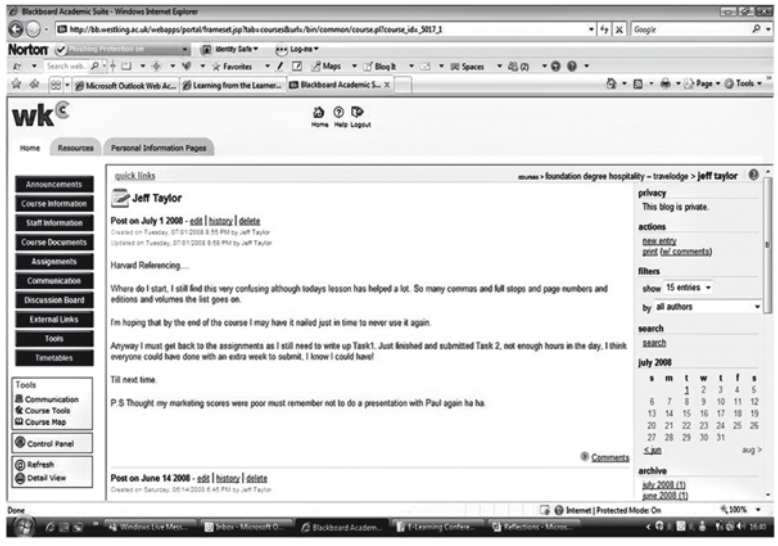

Figure 3. Extract from a student blog

Blackboard and the IQER

A recent Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review praised Westminster Kingsway's use of Blackboard as an example of Good Practice. In particular, the IQER noted 'the role of the VLE' in both 'the delivering and submission of assessment' and 'the quality of feedback and the use of online feedback', which contributed to Core Theme 1 (Academic Standards). In addition, the 'use of the VLE in providing students with programme and module information' was key to Core Theme 3 (Public Information).

The development of Blackboard – developer's viewpoint

From the feedback received, and in order to develop the online course for the Army, the developers for this course met with IT staff and discussed what was required. Weekly training sessions followed, and materials were adapted as follows:

The Text Box

Up to this point, lecturers had just been uploading lesson materials. It was decided that Powerpoint presentations would not engage the learner enough, and some more interactive lessons had to be designed. One way of doing this was to make more effective use of the text box, so rather than just uploading lesson notes under Course Documents (see Figure 1), a folder within Course Documents was set up for each lesson. This lesson was mainly text based, but also included embedded hyperlinks to external websites, and to other areas within Blackboard, such as discussion forums, blogs and wikis. Pictures and videos were also embedded, and any additional handouts were attached within the lesson, so the students would know at which point in the lesson they would need to refer to them.

Jolliffe et al. (2003) state that when developing materials for online usage the instructional strategies would need to include:

1) Pre instructional activities;
2) Information presentation;
3) Activation of Learning;
4) Assessment of learning outcomes;
5) Follow up and mediation.

Such strategies were incorporated into lesson designs by using various Blackboard tools to engage the learner.

Figure 4. Lesson notes using the text box

Discussion Forums and Wikis

To make the lessons more interactive, various discussion forums and wikis have been set up throughout the module for the students to use. Salmon (2006) explains that discussion-based e-tivities work well, as long as they are structured and focused. Forums were set up to encourage dialogue, collaboration, criticism and debate.

The Wikis can be used for both formative assessment and summative assessment, as they can be attached to a grade book. They can also allow for comments to be added by other students. This is therefore a great tool for the students to work collaboratively - for example, students could be asked to work in groups and research a topic and then put

their findings on a wiki page that they design. Once this is completed, the wiki pages are opened up for other students to comment on, thereby enabling a peer review of one another's work.

With regard to online collaborative work, Maier and Warren (2002) highlight the challenges this can bring with the lack of social cues associated with this medium. Users can over-react, which can lead to 'flaming', disrupting discussion and demotivating other students. Therefore the tutor's role is important in monitoring usage and facilitating these exercises. To assist our students in understanding the etiquette required when using these tools, a session on 'netiquette' was included when introducing them to Blackboard, and one of their first wiki tasks was to set some ground rules in order to build a sense of trust and a shared purpose within their new community.

Online quizzes

Using Blackboard's Question Pool facility, online quizzes have been designed. These are loaded up and added to a bank of quizzes, which means that they can be utilised for any course. The quizzes also help with formative assessment, and could also be linked to the grade book facility for summative assessment.

Video footage

For some elements of the teaching video footage has been used. This has been done through a variety of formats, from using video cameras, webcams, YouTube and software such as photostory. Maier and Warren (2002) state that digital video delivered using the internet is best suited to short video clips. Therefore when video has been used it has been comprised of short clips that download easily.

The way forward

Salmon (2005) states that induction into the online environment is critical for success. Initially, a face-to-face induction programme to Blackboard, for both students and new lecturers, would be beneficial to those that have not used it before. This would highlight and introduce the benefits of using the communication tools of discussion boards, chat rooms, wikis and blogs that will become ever more important for a distance learning course.

To ensure there is consistency amongst tutors over how Blackboard is used, a four-stage introduction is being introduced to all lecturers. This will demonstrate:

- Stage 1 – how to upload lesson materials;
- Stage 2 – how to mark online;
- Stage 3 – how to use discussion forums, chat rooms, wikis, and blogs consistently with students;
- Stage 4 – how to adapt materials for online usage.

Appropriate further training, such as the CeLTT (Certificate in e-Learning Teaching and Training) course, will enable lecturers to see the scope of Blackboard and to develop fully their e-learning skills.

The future strategy also makes use of good practice. Lecturers will be given an example of best practice, so that they can learn how to work more effectively with the VLE. Therefore the work carried out so far for The Army will be presented to the rest of the HE lecturing team.

For a developer and lecturer, one of the main issues will be the amount of extra time they will need, both to develop materials and to monitor the site – checking discussion forums and contributing to them. For such activities are all part of what is involved in becoming an e-tutor.

As the development of the use of Blackboard becomes more sophisticated, lecturers need to learn to be more flexible in the way they 'deliver' their courses, and be open to a wider variety of teaching methods that they may not have used before. They will need to develop their IT skills to become more familiar with the technology. They will also need to change the way they 'interact' with their students. Out of sight does not mean out of mind!

Reflections from the conference

The above information was presented at the e-learning conference at the University of Greenwich by Monica Or (Teacher and Developer) and Jeff Taylor, who gave the student perspective as one of Westminster Kingsway's Travelodge cohort.

There was a lot of interest throughout the presentation, and the audience particularly liked the ideas of moving away from Powerpoint and using tools such as discussion forums, blogs and wikis. Some of the key questions that came out from the discussion at the end were:

Q - How do you get students to use Blackboard?
A (Monica) – This is embedded from the start. During the Assessment days - run when recruiting students - we explain what Blackboard is; at Induction we demonstrate how to use it; and through the Personal Development module and Tutorials, various Blackboard tools are used and referred to. For distance learning students, it's their only way to access the lessons, so they have to use it.
A (Jeff) – I think Blackboard is a wonderful tool and wish it was around when I was at school.

Q - How do you get lecturers to use it?
A (Monica) – Blackboard is used as part of the Higher Education culture in the college. It is part of our Self Assessment Review, and it is embedded into action plans, and training is provided. Lecturers are able to arrange additional one-to-one or group training with the IT department if they wish.

Q - How did students feel about using the discussion forum?
A (Jeff) – For collaborative group work it was good. Particularly as the Travelodge students are working full time and are geographically dispersed all over England, it is difficult for us to get together physically to work on a task. Therefore the discussion forum helps us to communicate ideas.

Q - How long does it take to mark a piece of work online?
A (Monica) – It takes no longer to mark a piece of work online than it does by hand, and you usually end up giving more detailed feedback online, which the student is able to read.
A (Jeff) – It is a much more efficient way to receive feedback. We are so keen to find out how we've done that we normally end up chasing our lecturer to get our feedback even quicker! [i.e. within the standard 10-15 day turnaround]

Further research

The Foundation Degree in Hospitality Management for the Army went live on Monday 21 July 2008. The students were given a face-to-face induction, which included a session on how to use Blackboard and its various tools. Once enrolled on to Blackboard, the students were immediately exploring its contents and getting familiar with the site.

Students' usage of the site will be monitored by their tutors, and questionnaires will be given to them periodically throughout their course to see how they are finding the content on Blackboard and how they make use of the various tools.

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Chapter 7: Listening to Students, Listening to Staff

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City University

This summary paper looks at capturing the learner experience and profiling staff e-learning skills, experience and knowledge on a Radiography and Bar vocational course.

Introduction

Innovative and appropriate use of m-learning and e-learning on City University's part-time Bar vocational course is being advocated to improve flexibility, student numbers and assessment results. Meanwhile, the introduction of intensive VLE use on City's undergraduate Radiography course may be linked to lower exam scores and lower face-to-face session attendance.

These very different scenarios can be explored using similar techniques to investigate the learner experience and staff perspective in order to inform course redesigns. Using staff and student evaluation it will be possible to identify key issues and areas for change.

Evaluation tools

Tracking data, interviews, observation and questionnaires are used to discover how students are learning and engaging with technology on the course. Student questionnaires asked nine questions (4 closed), and elicited 33 responses (see Fig. 1 for a 'taster'). Student interviews lasted around 45 minutes, with VLE usage observation, and included a £20 voucher incentive. A series of student case studies can be generated from this collated data.

The Tutor Profiling took 15 tutors and profiled their e-learning skills, experience and knowledge. This aspect gives staff the opportunity to articulate their own strengths,

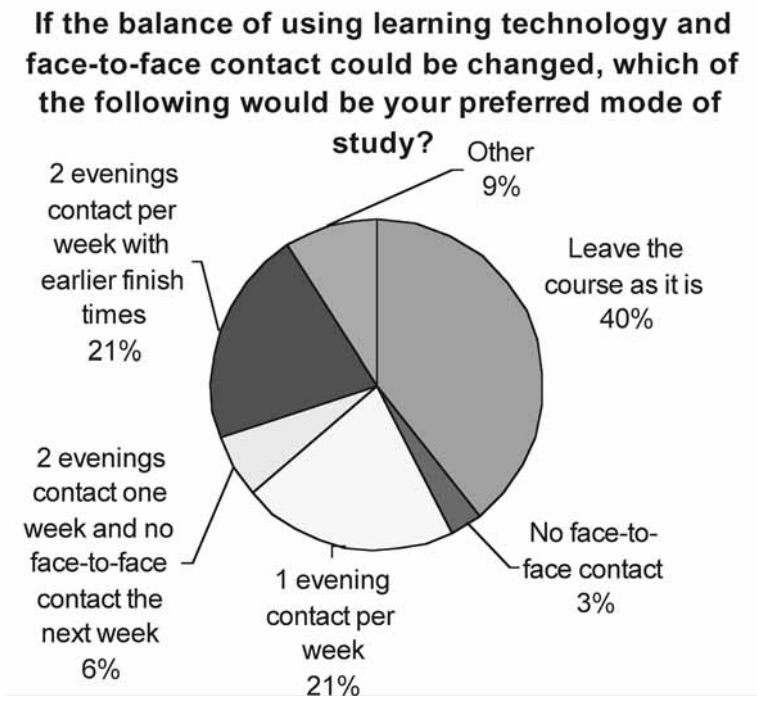

Fig. 1. A breakdown of one of the questionnaire's responses

weaknesses, concerns and ideas while discussing their students' needs. Consequently, course redesigns will respond to student requirements, yet also gain the buy-in of all staff members; they will take into account the significant impact of staff attitudes on the student experience and address staff abilities and professional development needs. These are important elements that would not be addressed through evaluating the learner experience in isolation of the staff experience.

The listening rationale

Staff profiling involves individual staff interviews, generating quantitative data and drawing out key themes. Profiling is now in progress and will continue throughout the summer. Student evaluation involves questionnaires, interviews, observation and tracking data.

The tracking will establish current patterns of use of the VLE. Questionnaires, interviews and observation will explore how students are currently learning and using technology, how the use of learning technology and face-to-face contact interrelates and what directions will enhance this experience.

The aim is to use this data to implement course redesigns that enhance the learner experience through increased engagement and flexibility, yet also take into account staff

perspectives, skills and professional development needs. The evaluation will also serve as a foundation to give a sense of ownership to changes by all staff and students.

Future strategies

This evaluation will help to form the basis of plans to redesign the delivery of both the Radiography and Bar vocational course. It will also determine what professional development opportunities will be offered, how staff work together to teach and develop teaching, and it should provide insights into the current state of e-learning preparedness of the relevant departments. Student feedback may also become more integral in informing how courses are developed. Impact will be affected by the amount of resources porvided to support these changes.

Potential obstacles

It is anticipated that there may be a number of issues arising from this strategy. Potential areas of resistance include:

- Changes to working practice;
- The use of new technologies;
- Pressure on time and workload;
- Lack of confidence in using technologies; and
- Concern about motivating and engaging students.

Key measures to employ in response to such concerns could include:

- Offering clear direction and leadership;
- Scaffolding and support in using new technologies;
- Ensuring space for experimentation and sense of ownership of any changes;
- Targeting resources and course aspects in order to do ‘a little very well’ rather than a lot not so well;
- Using continual student evaluation and feedback;
- Rewards and recognition for participation and improvement.

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Chapter 8: Learning from Discussion

Sandra Clarke
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This paper is intended to be a simple reflection on my experiences in using WebCT discussion boards as a way to listen to students and to respond to their learning needs. It is based mainly on my teaching on the LLB course at the University of Greenwich over the past five years.

Learning context

I am the course co-ordinator of Land Law, a core level 2 course on the LLB programme, taken by approximately 130 students each year. The course is regarded as a difficult one by students, as the concepts and language of land law are unfamiliar to most of them, and the course is heavy on legal content. The course tends to be content-driven, as there is a large volume of information to impart. Qualifying Law Degrees are regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority[1] and there is little scope to alter the core courses.

However, as well as the heavy content load, there are also key legal skills to be taught, particularly the ability to read and interpret technical legal documents. By the end of the course, students need to be able to read and understand complex legal materials such as leases, transfers and Land Registry title information documents.

The course is taught by weekly two-hour lectures, and weekly 50 minute seminars. The materials for the course are available on WebCT as well as in hard copy. Students are assessed by three pieces of coursework: a web page submitted early in term one via WebCT; a seen timed assignment at the start of term two; and a piece of research coursework at the end of term two. In addition, there is an unseen examination at the end of the course.

1 See The Joint Statement on Qualifying Law Degrees, available from: http://www.sra.org.uk/documents/students/academic-stage/academicjointstate.pdf

Lack of feedback

Since students perceive this course as difficult, I have tried a number of ways in the past to keep students engaged with the course and to obtain regular feedback from them. Initially, this was by paper means. For example, I used a seminar record form, which I asked them to complete with questions, observations etc. at the end of each seminar. This was partially successful, but tended to 'drop off' as term went on. I replaced this with an online learning log, using first the assessment feature in WebCT, and later the journaling feature available on the discussion boards. However, students made less use of this facility than I had anticipated, so clearly it was not meeting their needs. Both methods usually gave me very bland, superficial feedback, although some comments were useful and I acted upon them.

It seems, therefore, that simply asking students for comments about the course is not the way to find out what they think, what they are worried about, or what is going well. I began to realise that sometimes students do not really understand what they need from the lecturer, or are not able to articulate it in response to questions. I was keen to find another way of hearing student views and understanding their needs, but I was uncertain how to do this. Feedback forms, online polls etc. had not proved very successful and face-to-face discussions with students are constrained by time.

Use of discussion boards

Coincidentally, I had started to use WebCT bulletin boards to support the seen timed assignment submitted by students in January of each year. This assignment consists of a legal document or documents (most commonly, a land registry title information document[1]). This document and a series of questions on it are handed out in December.

Students had always been able to ask questions about this assignment, and to work together in groups to find out the answers. The discussion boards on WebCT provide a more efficient way of doing this, especially as some of the work is done over the Christmas break. At first, I used threaded boards on which students asked and answered questions under their own names. However, feedback prompted me to change the settings to anonymous posting. This greatly increased the use of the boards, with students evidently far more comfortable asking 'simple' questions under anonymous conditions. I signed my own posts so they would know that I had replied to them.

These timed assignment boards led me to realise that I could learn far more from the discussion boards than I had at first supposed. The students expressed difficulties and frustrations in completing the task in ways that led me to think about how I was teaching them, and what changes I could make. I could see fundamental errors in their

1 An example of such a document can be found at the Land Registry web site: http://www.landregistry.gov.uk/www/wps/QDMPS-Portlet/resources/example_register.pdf

understanding in a way that had not emerged during face-to-face sessions such as seminars. For example, one student wrote the following:

> *Okay I wrote about the 'basics', but am confused very much about the interests need to be protected. Where can I find any hints on how the interests protected under LRA02 were once treated under 1925 Act?*
>
> *Should I also discuss 'what-if' it-is-not-registered or 'what-if' the-formalities-were-not-met-then situation related to the lease in question?*
>
> *How about the elements of a lease before even discussing about the formalities? Would it give me any credits if I mentioned (maybe in a sentence or two)? But there are much to write already!!*

This post indicated real confusion and a lack of awareness of how to structure answers to very specific questions. The student could not work out which material was relevant, and which was not. I replied:

> *No, don't discuss what a lease is - that comes up in another question. Remember, this is a 10 mark question. Concentrate on the formalities and the need to register. You can stick with the current law; the old law was similar apart from the 21 year term being the minimum for compulsory registration. If you can briefly outline what happens if no deed is used, or the lease is not registered, that would get marks. As always with law questions, it's a balancing act between time and knowledge!*

Since all the students could read this comment, transparency and fairness was maintained. The student was getting help tailored to his needs, but this was not 'extra' help, as it was available to all the students on the course, whether they had expressed a need or not. They were all free to make use of it in completing the assignment.

Grades achieved in the timed assignment rose considerably after we started to use the discussion boards. Students who worked hard could obtain marks in excess of 80%, which is rare in any law assessment. This improved student confidence and spurred them on to work hard during the rest of the course.

Web page assignment

Building on the success of the discussion boards for the timed assignment, I changed the assessment on the course by introducing the web page assignment, together with a bulletin board to support it. This is an assessment set early in the course; it carries few marks (5%), is intended to bring out the creative side of the students and to engage them in the course, as well as to assess learning. The students are asked to create a

web page on which they include a picture of some object (for example, a statue) that may or may not legally form part of 'land'. They then use the case law to discuss whether or not it does form part of the land.

The web page assignment comes before the much weightier timed assignment, which, as the bulletin boards had revealed to me, was too complicated for many students as a first assessed piece of work. The discussion boards from the first attempt in 2006-7 provided me with numerous insights into the students' minds, and I improved the assignment in 2007-8 as a result, mainly by providing greater help with the technical aspects of creating and uploading a simple web page. The bulletin boards have continued to give me further insights. For example, one student posted:

> *Ive been here for 3 hours trying to get my picture to show on the webpage... for some reason it works before i zip the file but once the folder is zipped the webpage doesn't show the picture!! so when i submit the work, you wont be seeing the picture unless u view the seperate image file attached with the zipped folder!!! WHATS GOING ON AND WHY DO UNFORTUNATE THINGS ALWAYS HAPPEN TO ME :(*

This heart-felt post indicates how hard the student was working to complete this assignment, and how difficult they were finding it. Lecturers sometimes think that students who fail to complete assignments are not trying hard enough, but this message enabled me to appreciate the efforts the student was making to complete even a small assignment with few marks attached, and how much she cared about getting it right. Fortunately, I was able to make an appointment for her to upload the assignment in my presence, and I corrected the cause of her difficulties. Despite the occasional outbursts of despair such as the one above, students generally reported enjoying the web page assignment, and were pleased when the resulting web pages were published on WebCT for others to see.

Time-stamped research

Finally, this year, an assessment preparation record for the research coursework, which had previously been in paper format, was transferred to WebCT. The coursework consists of a lengthy scenario that raises a number of inter-related legal issues, which the students must research. The research must be recorded by the students as they do it. This research record carries 5% of the marks for Land Law, so should be taken seriously by the students. They are supposed to record their research as they go along, but we became aware that some students made up the record at the end of the period of research, writing what they thought we wanted to read. Transferring it to WebCT meant that each entry was time-stamped, so we could see if it was contemporaneous with the actual research or not. We used the journaling feature in WebCT, so that the entries made by each student were private between them and the lecturers.

Seeing the students' research efforts in real time allowed my colleague and me to understand the process the students used to complete their work. Again, these were different to what we had believed was happening. Some students wrote excellent records, showing well-developed research skills:

Subject: Resulting and Constructive Trusts
Date: 24 February 2008 00:35
COMMENT: I've read chapter 17 of 'Judith-Anne Mackenzie' on Resulting and Constructive trusts.
By reading this I found out that it is the constructive trust that arises for Betty not resulting trust as there is no direct financial contribution by her to the property.
FURTHER ACTION: To read the cases on constructive trusts, especially Lloyds Bank v Rosset

Subject: Gissing v Gissing and Lloyds Bank v Rosset
Date: 24 February 2008 23:53
COMMENT: I've read the case of Gissing and understood that even through an indirect contribution to the mortgage installment or enabling the other partner to pay the mortgage and carrying out household expenses can constitute a constructive trust.
This was affirmed in Lloyds Bank v Rosset and later in Le Foe v Le Foe
FURTHER ACTION: To read Stack v Dowden

Subject: Stack v Dowden
Date: 25 February 2008 23:16
COMMENT: Here there was a resulting trust but this is not applicable to our question. However, I found some basic principles from this case especially the judgements by Baroness Hale where the case of Lloyds Bank v Rosset was reviewed.
FURTHER ACTION: To read other cases on constructive trusts.

This student had a methodical approach, each piece of research being based on his previous notes for further action. He began the work on 24th February, and his last post was on 7th March, showing a suitable period over which research was conducted and the essay written.

Other students revealed their poor research skills:

Subject: Assessment preparation
Date: 07 March 2008 15:32
COMMENT: I read the relevant chapter in the Roger Sexton book and now I understand so much better.

Subject: Online databases
Date: 07 March 2008 15:35
COMMENT: I realised how useful online databases can be on the rare opportunities I get to use internet for research. Computers are usually not available in the library when I intend to use one.

Subject: Rosset
Date: 07 March 2008 15:37
COMMENT: Lloyds Bank plc v Rosset helped me solve question (a). I found the division of cases into 2 categories clever and helpful.

Subject: Insolvency Act 1986
Date: 07 March 2008 15:38
COMMENT: The Insolvency Act was useful in question (c)

Subject: IOLIS
Date: 07 March 2008 15:40
COMMENT: I worked trough IOLIS and noticed that even though it gives a short summary of each topic, it looks at issues from a different point of view than the book does. It was convenient that all the relevant cases were available to be read while working.

This student has posts only on one day – the date of coursework hand-in. The posts are unstructured and unhelpful, displaying an unstructured course of reading. Introductory material (such as IOLIS, an interactive law teaching tool) is read after specific cases. The student also reveals problems in accessing computers, something she had not mentioned to lecturers in face-to-face meetings.

Tailoring responses

Reading what the students had written enabled us to tailor a workshop closely to their needs for completing this coursework. We could also respond when students were clearly going far off-course with their research, though comments made by us were few, as this is intended to be a less supported piece of work than either the web page or timed assignment.

The assessments in the Land Law course were praised by the external examiner, who wrote:

> *I like the way you aim to develop a whole range of skills in this module, including research skills, and I find the way you assess this quite revealing - many students seem to have difficulty knowing which are the most useful sources to go for. This is probably true of students everywhere but your method reveals it quite starkly.*

Discussion boards have provided me with unexpected insights into the processes students use to complete assignments and into their needs in terms of tuition and learning opportunities. The ability to ask questions anonymously in a non-threatening environment has opened up ways of listening to the student experience that I had not foreseen[1]. It may be that when students are under pressure, trying to complete a task, they are better able to express their views, make explicit what they think about a course, and what a lecturer can do to assist them. Certainly, the discussion boards are very well used, with over 1,500 posts in 2007-8.

Future strategies

I will continue to make use of discussion boards. I can now see more opportunities to understand what students are thinking, and how they learn. This enables me to reflect upon my own teaching. My colleague on the Land Law course, who had not previously used WebCT, was impressed with the insights it gave us into students' research skills.

I plan to start using discussion boards in a first year skills course, both to understand the students better and to enable richer relationships to grow between the students, and with their tutors. I think that many teachers, even those sceptical about e-learning, will find that discussion boards used for particular assessment tasks improve the quality of feedback a teacher can get from a course, especially a very content-driven course like Law. In turn, this can lead to better and more immediate feedback to students, the removal of obstacles to learning, and a more engaged student body.

1 This observation has also been made in respect of undergraduate teaching in other disciplines. See, for example, John Markwell, Using the Discussion Board in the Undergraduate Biochemistry Classroom: Some Lessons Learned. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education* Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 260–264, 2005 and the articles cited therein. [Retrieved 19 October 2008 from: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/113449133/PDFSTART]

Chapter 9: Listening to the Student Voice

Helen Lyons, Louise Thorpe, Carin Fyfe
& Rebecca Trewarne
Sheffield Hallam University

Actively engaging with student feedback to inform future developments enhances students' sense of involvement. This paper will share outcomes from a recent qualitative diary study into students' experiences of e-learning, including information about methods and findings, and how these have directly informed developments in institutional policies and academic practice. In addition, two students who took part in the research share their experiences of participating in the study, their sense of involvement within the broader learning experience and their perceptions of e-learning.

Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University is committed to providing e-learning opportunities that enhance the student learning experience, and offer students the flexibility to engage with learning materials, tutors and peers in a way that suits their increasingly busy lifestyles. Blackboard (the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)) is a key feature of the student learning experience at Sheffield Hallam University. Approximately 95% of students are enrolled on at least one Blackboard site, and 75% of modules are supported by a Blackboard module site (07/08 figures). The current research seeks to evaluate student experiences of e-learning at an institutional, rather than modular, level.

Using a qualitative approach, the research aimed to explore how and where students are engaging with learning through the use of technology, and to determine student preferences for use of technology or other learning materials, with a particular focus on student engagement with the VLE in the context of their holistic learning experience.

Method

This research employed a three-stage approach in order to gather rich and meaningful data. Stage one was a pre-study questionnaire, aimed at collecting background data and establishing perceived competence with technology. From this, eleven participants

of varying levels of self-perceived ability were selected to continue through to stage two of the research. At stage two, participants were asked to keep a learning diary for a period of two weeks, during which they were sent a series of prompt questions via SMS text message. The final stage of the research was an interview, which addressed any themes emerging from the diary.

Eight undergraduate and three postgraduate students participated in the study. Participants were briefed prior to the start of stage two, the two week diary-based study. They were informed that they would receive a text message prompt daily, and be expected to create a diary entry each day. They were asked to keep their diary using whichever medium they felt most comfortable with, and various options including paper, electronic and audio or video were discussed. All but one participant chose to keep an electronic diary in the form of a blog within Blackboard, the remaining participant selecting a free online blog site.

Participants were asked to keep a daily learning log of e-learning activities and were also required to reflect upon a different question each day, sent as an SMS text message. During interviews, participants described the text messages as 'a useful reminder', which helped them think more deeply about e-learning and what it means to them and their learning experience.

Findings

Participants in the study recognised that e-learning was a crucial part of their learning experience, and it was perceived by most as enhancing the quality of that experience. The participants had varying levels of ability in terms of IT skills, yet they all found Blackboard easy to use. Concerns were raised that 'others less capable' may struggle with the widespread use of technology, but no participant felt that this was an issue for them personally. Two students shared their stories at the e-learning@greenwich/ conference.

Carin's story

Carin is a mature postgraduate student studying a management course part-time at Sheffield Hallam University. As a distance learning student, Carin feels that e-learning has the potential significantly to enhance her learning experience, but she suggests that, at present, the VLE is not being used to its full potential.

Carin receives the majority of her course material in a physical pack at the beginning of each academic year, and some of this is then replicated on Blackboard. Four out of ten of her modules are supported by Blackboard, but she feels that the inconsistent, and sometimes sporadic, use of Blackboard has a negative impact upon her learning experience. A key concern for Carin is that much of the material she receives in hard copy is quickly outdated and, as a result, she often finds herself searching for more

current material than is provided for her. She feels that the VLE has the potential to overcome this by offering tutors an opportunity to provide relevant and timely material, without the additional cost of printing and distributing it in hard copy.

Reliance on hard copy resources where electronic resources may be an appropriate, and in some cases preferable, alternative, indicates that some staff are still cautious of using the VLE as the primary method of sharing resources with students. This point demonstrates an issue of digital fluency amongst staff, one that is currently being addressed by a large scale 'Digital Fluency Initiative' at the University. The scope of this initiative addresses issues such as information literacy, IT skills, online interaction techniques and critical thinking amongst both staff and students, and how these can underpin the thoughtful implementation of technology. Carin suggests that, from her perspective, the ideal solution would be to receive the core course material in the traditional paper-based pack, but for this to be complemented by regular updates and additions through the VLE.

As a distance learning student, Carin's main contact with the University is through the VLE. She finds that distance learning can be challenging and, at times, isolating. The VLE offers an opportunity for her to communicate with other distance learning students. Although few students are at the same point in their studies, she feels it would be reassuring to communicate with students at all stages in the course through discussion boards, as this would create a sense that she is not alone in her studies, and that others have encountered the same difficulties and may be able to provide her with advice and reassurance.

Sheffield Hallam University is currently promoting good practice in e-supported distance learning delivery through a six week online course for staff. This is aimed at developing the skills and approaches required to engage distance learning students in deep learning through the use of discussion boards and other such tools. In addition, the use of 'Elluminate', a tool that facilitates synchronous communication between tutors and students, is being explored for use with students who learn at a distance.

Rebecca's story

Rebecca is an undergraduate student studying a Healthcare course full-time at Sheffield Hallam University. At present, all of Rebecca's modules are supported by Blackboard and this provides a central location for all course information. She encounters various uses of the VLE, including online tests, keeping a reflective blog and online submission of her coursework. Sheffield Hallam actively encourages staff to utilise the broader functionality of the VLE to ensure that students receive a high quality learning experience.

Rebecca feels that Blackboard significantly enhances her learning experience, but does have some reservations over how it is used. A key concern for Rebecca is that her

module sites within Blackboard lack consistency in layout and design, and this can make it difficult to find things. She suggests that the terminology used varies between tutors, for example one tutor may use 'Learning Resources' where another uses 'Course Material' and students therefore have to develop an awareness of what to expect from each individual tutor.

This perspective reflects the views expressed by a number of students in other evaluative studies and is seen, institutionally, as one of the unintended consequences of bottom-up implementation and the evolution of the functionality of the VLE over the years. To address this, a large scale project is underway to encourage conversations in subject groups to explore the concept of consistency and how it might be applied in their context. Where appropriate, Faculty-based e-learning advisors work with the subject groups to identify appropriate terminology and agree a set structure for the first four menu items within Blackboard. The idea is not to 'standardise' module sites, but to make it easier for students to find materials in a consistent location across module sites whilst still enabling staff to use different features and functions to meet the needs of that module.

Further to this, Rebecca believes that it is necessary for each Blackboard module site to have a clear purpose and that this should be conveyed to the student early on. At Sheffield Hallam, staff are encouraged to create a 'site rationale' to explain the purpose of the site to students, and to outline what they should expect and what is expected from them. By creating a rationale, staff think more carefully about the purpose of their site and set out clear expectations, which, in turn, means that students are more likely to engage.

Conclusion

Constant attention and positive reaction to the views and inputs of stakeholders, particularly students, have informed key priorities for development. The student voice is 'ever present' and directly informs practice, the design of support structures, the functionality development roadmap and the nature and content of professional development activities. Feedback has also been used to inform strategic direction, and has a direct impact upon local and institutional planning priorities.

It is anticipated that the outcomes of this research study will trigger further research activities within the institution focused around the key themes. In addition, recommendations for change will be made in a report to the Academic Development Committee. This research reinforces the need for consistency throughout module sites within courses, and ongoing work to encourage consistency will continue into the next academic year. In addition, the key findings of this research will be used to inform staff development sessions around embedding e-learning into the curriculum, and thoughtful implementation of technology.

Chapter 10: Learning from the Students: Progression in Information Skills and the Library Tour Podcasts

Sarah Crofts, Irene Barranco & Maggie Leharne
University of Greenwich

Using funding from the University's Learning & Teaching Innovation Fund, a team from Information & Library Services (ILS) developed podcasts of library tours to enhance the student induction experience in 2007-08. The online *Progression in Information Skills* was developed in 2005-06 with funding from the University's Learning & Quality Office Student Retention fund. The course has been available to all students and staff in the University of Greenwich since September 2007, following the successful trial in 2006-07 with the School of Humanities & Social Sciences.

These two resources are designed for students to use on and off campus, without staff support. It is important for ILS to find out how students use the resources and what they think of them.

Irene Barranco, Sarah Crofts and Maggie Leharne carried out a small scale, but in-depth study, on how both *Progression* and the podcasts are used by students. The research findings report the students' experience of resources; they also identify possible improvements and developments for the future, many of which have already been put into effect.

Listening to the student voice: the focus group model

The focus group model was chosen to allow us to approach students face-to-face in an informal way. We also wished to avoid presenting students with another survey as they have been asked to complete the National Student Survey, amongst many others.

The focus group gave participating students time to look at *Progression* modules, listen to the podcasts and give us their views on content, appearance and presentation, as

well as on how students use them. The study investigated students who had no previous experience of either resource, as well as established users.

The findings

The study investigated the students' ability to complete *Progression* modules as well as their views on design, content, usability and their own self-assessment of their knowledge. The study concentrated on three out of the eight *Progression* modules:

- Finding quality information on the internet;
- Bibliographic citation; and
- Using electronic journals and databases.

The study also investigated students' views on the quality and usefulness of the podcasts of the library tours.

Progression

A total of 16 students attended the focus groups; their attendance was rewarded with £25 worth of Amazon vouchers. Although a small number, students from all levels and a variety of disciplines were included. Prior to participation in the focus group, only 4 out of the 16 knew about *Progression*. They all said that they:

- Learnt something new after working through one of the modules;
- Found the module they looked at useful, or very useful;
- Discovered new information;
- Would use it again.

We asked the students to assess their knowledge, on a scale of 1 to 10, before and after using the module in *Progression*. In all cases the students marked themselves higher after working through the *Progression* module. The lowest mark after looking at *Progression* was a 6.

According to the students, the *Progression* modules are easy to use, with very clear information. They also felt that the use of English was simple and likely to be easily understood by students whose first language is not English.

The only aspects of *Progression* that generated criticism were those relating to navigation and font size in the menu headings, which are both areas set in WebCT and not changeable by designers. WebCT uses rather small arrows at the top right of the screen, which we found were generally not noticed by the students. The text is easy to navigate from the left hand menu, but the font size is too small, again a feature of WebCT that we were not able to alter.

One group of students, studying computing, was quite critical of the design and suggested that a higher resolution was needed for the images.

Podcasts

Of the students who attended the Focus groups, 11 completed the podcast survey. The students were all based at the University's Maritime Greenwich campus, except for one who studied at one of the University's Partner Colleges. They were split evenly between years. The students listened to both the General library podcast and the Maritime Greenwich library tour. One student walked round the library listening to the podcast; the others listened on computers, either in the library or at home.

46% of the students said that the podcasts were very useful; 27% found them fairly useful; 18% said they were useful; and 9% didn't find them very useful.

Favourable comments included:

> *Having listened …I have a clear idea where the locations of the books and journals are in the Dreadnought Library… (Yr 1 Greenwich Maritime Institute student)*

> *We should have known about the podcast at the beginning of year not at the end. (Yr 1 Business student)*

Other students commented:

> *Far too long…separate podcasts with separate links on the website...listen to the bits they needed. (Yr 2 Humanities & Social Sciences student)*

> *I've never noticed this link before… (Yr 1 Business student)*

Consideration of the likely impact on practice

1. Progression

- Students noted that on the whole it is easy to navigate, despite the easily missed WebCT navigation arrows.
- Students can learn independently, at their own pace and self assess their knowledge.
- As an online course it needs to have a more prominent link. The students commented that it is not easy enough to find. Students, academics and new library staff need to know about it. We need to work harder on publicising it.

The findings enabled Irene Barranco, Sarah Crofts and the rest of the Academic Support team to:

- Renew and update the content of *Progression*, over Summer 2008;
- Review the layout and design, including the balance between text and images, taking into consideration students' preferences;
- Add more interactive and subject specific information, e.g. by inclusion of interactive online INFORMS modules (http://www.informs.intute.ac.uk).

Development of *Progression* to include subject specific INFORMS modules will make the package more attractive to academic staff who may wish to incorporate it into their teaching by suggesting specific electronic resources to students, instead of just asking them to browse the online resources. A separate ILS project is currently developing INFORMS modules, one of which has been completed and linked to from *Progression*.

Irene Barranco and Sarah Crofts ran a series of presentations at MG and MW in mid-September 2008 to promote and explain *Progression* to academic and ILS staff. The OSCARS (support for remote users) team has been promoting both *Progression* and the podcasts to Partner College staff and students; other members of LS staff have been using it and promoting it to their students.

2. Podcasts

The feedback seemed to indicate that the students found the podcasts an easy technology to use, and saw them as a useful tool for learning about the libraries. It was therefore decided to revise and re-record the podcasts over the summer and relaunch at induction in September 2008.

The feedback specifically indicated that we needed to look at the length of the General Library podcast and introduce headings, so that the individual sections of this podcast could be downloaded and listened to separately. This issue was addressed in the revision work.

It was also obvious that future training was needed to familiarise sufficient numbers of ILS staff with the technology to ensure the continuing viability of the project. This is an issue that is being looked at. Equally crucial was the adoption of podcasting as a mainstream service by ILS, so as to be able to sustain this initiative in terms of costs and staff time. ILS was also invited to be involved in discussions regarding podcast initiatives that were being developed by the University.

The team was also conscious of the need to be listening to the experience of all our users, so it has suggested, for example, the production of podcast library tours in other languages, as well as 'historic' and 'virtual' tours. It is hoped that feedback from the 2008/9 induction period will indicate whether users regard these suggestions as useful.

Proposed strategies for managing change

Academic Services Librarians will look after their own topics to update information, or develop specific paragraphs for their own subjects.

Any changes will be overseen by the ILS Information Skills group in order to keep consistency and quality through the system.

Change will be managed by a combination of the following approaches:

- Meetings;
- Sharing of podcast production skills amongst ILS staff;
- Collecting feedback from users;
- Publicity;
- Demonstrations to staff;
- Demonstrations to schools who currently have limited contact with ILS services;
- Promotion of *Progression* and podcasts to remote learners and staff and students of Partner Colleges;
- Continuing ILS involvement with University podcast initiatives.

Acknowledgements

Irene Barranco, Sarah Crofts and Maggie Leharne made this presentation at the conference, but the projects drew upon the skills of many other members of Information & Library Services staff, all of whom we thank, especially Peter Wills for his work on the podcasts.

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INFORMS Home Page: http://www.informs.intute.ac.uk

Podcasts: http://www.gre.ac.uk/offices/ils/ls/guides/podcasts/libraryguide

Progression in Information Skills: http://www.gre.ac.uk/offices/ils/ls/guides/information_skills/progression

Chapter 11: Flexible Learning in East Sussex

Paul Le Fevre & Joan Amos
Flexible Learning (FLESS), East Sussex County Council

The Flexible Learning Educational Support Service (FLESS) supports schools in East Sussex in carrying out their responsibilities to sick children, as set out in 'Access to Education for Children with Medical Needs' (DfES 2001); it also carries out the Local Authority's responsibilities regarding the education provided by parents who elect to Home Educate under the 1996 Education Act; and it provides e-learning for sick children and other vulnerable young people to help them have access to education.

FLESS has a team of teachers, most of whom are core service staff, who work with the groups described above. During the past year one of our most successful innovations has been to appoint a number of teaching assistants (TAs) to the team. They have become an extremely valuable resource in assisting young people back into school after a period of ill health, or when they are particularly anxious about going to school. The TAs also help young people to log into e-learning initially and contact them if they do not attend lessons. When more young people are referred to the service than the core team are able to provide for, we call upon a supply of experienced sessional teachers.

What form does FLESS take?

East Sussex is divided into three areas, each with an area coordinator for sick children and Home Education. e-Learning is coordinated centrally.

Learning takes place via live classes, using the internet for access. Children and young people and teachers interact in a virtual classroom; they can speak to each other, and there is a whiteboard on screen that can be used by any participant in the lesson. The resources for the lesson are displayed on the whiteboard and software and access to educational internet sites can be shared across this learning platform.

Teachers and students can be in any location (home, a FLESS centre, a library, a school) and meet in a virtual interactive classroom. Currently teachers are based around the county, as are the students, and a timetable is sent to all. The students and teachers sign into the lessons that they are registered for, and the classes proceed from there. We offer a wide range of subjects for 25 hours a week of KS2, KS3 and KS4 lessons.

Lessons are recorded for future reference by students. All the lessons are recorded and archived so that students can use them later as a resource. This also acts as a means of quality control.

If children and young people do not have access to the internet, recorded lessons and teaching materials can be provided for them on CD ROM, or they can access work via the learning gateway, now on the desktop of all libraries in the county.

Who is it for?

e-Learning was developed for children and young people who are unable to attend school due to ill health or because of anxiety-related conditions. As a future development, we hope to make it available through the children's wards in our local hospitals, to provide continuity of education for those children and young people needing to be admitted.

e-Learning has also become part of the provision available to permanently excluded children and young people, following the changes to the regulations regarding access to education. Those permanently excluded from school now have access to e-learning after Day 5 of that exclusion, if no place is available for them in a PRU. e-Learning can become all, or part, of their educational provision until more permanent provision can be arranged for them.

Pilots have been run for other groups such as Looked After Children, children and young people supported by the Anti Bullying Team, some children on the Autistic Spectrum, school age mothers and those at risk of permanent exclusion. There is also the possibility of extending it to other vulnerable groups such as those supported by the Youth Offending Team (YOT), and those entering the county late in Year 11 for whom school places may not be available.

What have the trends been during 2007-8?

During the academic year, we had 123 children and young people accessing e-learning and these were almost equally balanced in terms of gender. As would be expected, the young people predominantly supported were FLESS cases referred as sick children, although 18 were either permanently excluded or at risk of being so. Referrals came from all areas of East Sussex and two students were at school in Kent

How was e-learning rated by its users?

Of the families that responded to the emailed questionnaire about e-learning:

- 95% found it easy to use;
- 80% liked meeting other students;
- 92% found it easy to get into the classroom without help;
- 98% liked learning this way;
- 80% could access the work on the portal (this has been addressed by using the TAs and a self help Powerpoint);
- 65% sent work back to the teacher (note that some students were given work from their schools and we assisted them in doing this, so the work was returned to the teachers in the schools).

The welcome choice of subjects and standard of teaching was judged as very good, whether they had been with e-learning for a short or long time. No student offered improvements to the service.

Results for external examinations 2007

e-Learning uses the GOAL test to assess the performance level of young people when they are referred to the service for support. Now that the service has teaching assistants working within it, these tests will be followed up to demonstrate progress. Data is incomplete for this academic year, but measures are in place to ensure this is a routine procedure, so information for the next academic year will be far more complete.

Emotional impact

The impact of e-learning on the self confidence, sense of worth and emotional well-being of students who are out of school should not be under-estimated. Although it is hard to quantify, there is plenty of informal feedback and anecdotal evidence from FLESS to suggest that many users derive significant emotional support from their experiences. As one parent put it:

> *Even though her attendance wasn't great she loved doing virtual schooling and is sorry to be leaving.*

And perhaps the final word should go to one of the students themselves:

> *e-learning is wicked!*

Chapter 12: The Student Voice – Students' Experience of Blackboard

Simon Starr, Christine Ritchie
& Judy Gracey
Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU)

In 2006, we presented a case study at the e-learning@greenwich conference on the use of a VLE to promote independent learning[1] on a Foundation Degree programme. This focused mainly on staff views and experiences. Having used the VLE for some time now, we are currently researching students' experiences in order to evaluate progress and plan further developments.

Before the 2008 e-learning@greenwich conference, we filmed students discussing their experiences in using the VLE, producing a series of edited videos to share with programme tutors. We then filmed tutors discussing possible developments as a result of the students' comments.

The resulting conference presentation used video to show how the student voice can be used as a basis for the development of a university VLE. The main part of the conference presentation featured students 'talking for themselves' to delegates directly through video.

In addition to the video of the students' discussion, there was a (shorter) video of the tutors' conversation, followed by a presentation and discussion of our findings and the impact of the project, with planned developments in the VLE.

1 Ritchie, C., Starr, S. (2005). *Development Of Blackboard To Support Teaching Sessions and Promote Independent Learning (Foundation Degree in Child and Youth Studies)*. [Retrieved 18 March 2008 from: http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/support/learning-teaching-enhancement-unit/publications/case-studies.asp]

The learning context

The Foundation Degree in Childhood Studies is a part-time programme with approximately 400 students at HE Levels 1 and 2, with a further 200 following on to an associated Level 3 programme. The programme is delivered through scheduled taught sessions one day a week during term time (often away from University campuses and the support services based around them) and independent study.

Learners are typically mature, new to HE, well motivated, but lacking experience in studying at HE level. Their ICT skills tend not to be high, particularly regarding the appropriate use of ICT for academic study. Schools are generally the setting for the work-based element of the Foundation Degree.

Why listen to the student voice?

The Blackboard VLE has been used on the Foundation Degree Childhood Studies programme since 2005. Since that time, staff views and experiences of developments have been thoroughly discussed and documented, but the students' voice has not been researched so well. We have had some success in the use of the VLE to promote independent learning, but in order to move further forward, we need to talk more to our students.

This research project can be divided into 4 stages:

1. A questionnaire, sent to all students on the programme to obtain their views on Blackboard. This informs the construction of stage 2.

2. Conversations with small groups of students over lunch about their views on and experiences of Blackboard. These conversations would be partly prompted by the results of 1), but participants will be specifically encouraged to be open and free-ranging. No programme tutors will be present.

3. Videos of the student conversations would be shown to a meeting of programme tutors, who then consider what developments can be undertaken. This will be videoed.

4. The Programme Director will decide on a plan of work to be undertaken in response. This will also be videoed.

By way of a rationale for our approach in listening to the students' voice, we believe that there is potential in video to both:

a. Offer a more open, spontaneous medium for recording experiences; and

b. Present the students' voice to conference delegates more directly than listening to a conference paper.

The research project is being funded by Canterbury Christ Church University. It links with the HE Academy e-Learning Pathfinder programme, known internally as DEBUT[1], through which our tutors have been learning about producing digital videos, as well as other new technologies.

Outcomes

Two projected outcomes from this research are:

- Strengthening/spreading the VLE activities that students tell us they value;
- Learning about new VLE activities students may suggest, but that practitioners have yet to catch onto.

The second point is potentially a key area for us. For example, a tutor on the Foundation Degree programme has recently begun using the Netvibes[2] portal page with his students, following his experience in the DEBUT pathfinder project. His students are showing enthusiasm for sharing learning resources this way, outside of the institutional VLE.

Further impact may be some degree of culture change amongst those tutors who remain non-adopters of VLE. We would hope that in these cases, where traditional staff development had had little impact, listening to the student voice itself will be a more powerful driver for change in academic practice.

Change culture

Canterbury Christ Church University has a tradition of strong support for change in relation to the adoption of learning technologies as presented to ALT-C (2004)[3], including the early establishment of a learning technology team based in the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit.

Moving forwards, staff wishing to develop their use of the VLE as a result of this project will be able to participate in future DEBUT pathfinder project cohorts, through which they can receive highly situated staff development and support – the aim of DEBUT itself being specifically to enhance a staff's digital literacy.

1 DEBUT (Digital Experience Building in University Teaching) Project at Canterbury Christ Church University: http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/support/learning-teaching-enhancement-unit/Debut/

2 http://www.netvibes.com

3 ALT-C: Blue Skies And Pragmatism - Learning Technologies for the Next Decade (2004) *Cloud-busting: Learning Technologists and Institutional Culture Change.* [Retrieved 18 March 2008 from: http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2004/timetable/abstract.php?abstract_id=155]

Chapter 13: iBEL: Students' Perceptions of Learning Design

Michaela Kingham, Sean Myers & Eva Okunbar
Dartford Grammar School
Simon Walker, University of Greenwich

This paper examines iBEL, the International Baccalaureate e-Learning Laboratory, focusing in particular on the role of the student voice in evaluating and developing the use of Open Source Technologies in the post-16 curriculum.

Introduction

The iBEL project was a BECTA funded research project that took place between May 2007 and April 2008, and that aimed to explore the following question:

> *What role can learning design systems play in fostering independent learning in students on the International Baccalaureate programme?*

In exploring this question, the project aimed to:

- Encourage learner independence;
- Support independent learning;
- Build upon existing work in the eLISA[1] and eLIDA CAMEL[2] projects that explored learning design activity using selected open source platforms;
- Track learner activities to uncover common patterns of behaviour that may inform the design of future learning to discover principles of effective learning designs;
- Support a range of learning styles;
- Seek learner feedback on the learning designs and tools used.

1 e-Learning Independent Study Award (eLISA) is a JISC funded Distributed e-Learning (DeL) project: http://www.gre.ac.uk/elisa

2 eLIDA CAMEL is a JISC funded Design for Learning (D4L) project: http://www.gre.ac.uk/elidacamel

Before iBEL

Prior to this project, the Department of Education, Leadership and Development at the University of Greenwich (ELD) had been involved in other projects that provided the basis for the iBEL project. The first of these, the eLISA Project, had looked at the influence of learning design and e-learning in supporting students' study skills in schools and colleges in the London Borough of Greenwich, through the use of the open source systems, content management systems, Moodle and LAMS[1]. Dartford Grammar School (DGS) was involved as part of the dissemination of information at the end of eLISA and as a result was invited to take part in the eLIDA CAMEL Project. The aim of this project was to look at the flexibility of LAMS and Moodle, and to look at re-usability and the mentoring of staff. It sought to share practice between institutions. DGS staff were involved in this and iBEL grew out of the work done there.

iBEL – the international e-learning laboratory

This new collaboration involved just the University of Greenwich and Dartford Grammar School. The nominated teachers at Dartford Grammar School worked with practitioners from the Greenwich Department of Education, Leadership and Development (ELD) to develop their understanding of learning design[2]. Dartford Grammar School is one of a growing number of state schools to offer the International Baccalaureate Dilpoma[3]. The focus of practitioners' work was, therefore, situated in the 16-19 learner area of the school, where e-learning had been a serious focus as a way of developing students' independent learning, personalising learning, and thus raising standards of provision.

The focus of this project was on content and activity creation and evaluation in a Moodle environment. It sought to understand the creative combinations of the pedagogical techniques needed to deliver effective design for learning activities in and outside the classroom. The evaluation of the learning activities by learners formed a very important part of the methodology for the project.

Role of the learner

In total 70 students were involved in the project at some point. The information below was accessed in two ways: through an online survey and through filmed interviews.

1 LAMS is one of the first open source Learning Design systems to achieve widespread use, and indeed was singled out by the DFES for a trial by the Specialist Schools Trust to test its potential to develop and enhance learning at the Secondary level (http://www.cripsat.org.uk/current/elearn/bectalam.htm)

2 The ELD is a national leader in practitioner-focused Learning Design, and has successfully led national e-learning projects in relation to study skills Learning Design. For this project it hosted the integrated LAMS/Moodle environment, offered accredited training in using the system (http://www.gre.ac.uk/celtt/workshops) and provided guidance in learning design methodology.

3 http://www.ibo.org/diploma

We started the project with a belief that today's students, born 1982 – 1991 (the 'Net Generation'), regard technology as just a part of their world (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Initial surveys suggested that this was the case.

At the start of the project all learners felt able to describe themselves as confident users of technology, using a wide range of different technologies on a daily basis. 94% said that they liked, or didn't mind, using computers in their studies, and 74% said that they would not mind having the opportunity to use the types of activities to be used in the project, such as the forum, chatroom and journal, which they recognised from other applications. Their only concern about using technology was a fear of technology 'going wrong'.

Conclusions drawn from learner feedback

Independent learning appeared to be enhanced when:

- Teachers provided a clear framework for learning by selecting and linking to materials and resources, and structuring activities. Students reported that this saved them time in searching for resources whose reliability was unknown, and commented that the need for the teacher in face-to-face sessions could be diminished so long as the materials and activities had been pre-selected and structured.

- Used as an integral part of their general programme of study, rather than for extra or one-off activities. The blending of the use of a D4L system in class and outside class time improved student engagement with the online activities and materials.

- The representation of a learning design articulates when and how learning will occur over an extended time period. This also helps teachers to plan in the long term. Structured design helps students to prepare for a variety of activities and assists their understanding of the material they need to cover to achieve the learning outcomes. Teachers who pre-organised materials, supported communication and offered reassurance were leading to an increase in confidence in subject learning.

- Students enjoy the activities. Specific technologies appeared to motivate students in particular subject disciplines, notably forum, glossary tools and chat for students of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and English. Learners liked the links selected by their teachers to sites containing rich audio and video media.

Students' evaluation in more detail

At the Greenwich Conference, Eva Okunbor and Sean Myers, two Year 12 students, were able to give a summary of the students' views. Their comments revealed that they quickly adapted to the layout of the course areas, which they could easily access at home or at school. They did, however, feel that the design and navigation of Moodle was not entirely intuitive and was 'old-fashioned.'

Students were positive about the fact that the course areas allowed them to collaborate with others during periods of independent study. Five interviewees said that they had enjoyed the chat sessions, one stating that it was using the sort of tools that they would normally use at home. In the survey, one student was very positive about the forum 'because it's similar to other chat room sites such as Hotmail'. Three of the students interviewed commented on the importance of being able to share ideas, which was also a major focus of responses to the survey question: What did you like best? One student stated:

> *I liked to get different interpretations from other students, which helped to improve my understanding*

while another commented:

> *I liked reading other people's responses as they allowed me to consider and understand a range of opinions and approaches ... broadening my own understanding of the topic.*

A different student's response was:

> *I was ... able to view others' opinions. In this way, I was able to reflect upon what I [had] learnt, and look at different aspects.*

MFL students commented particularly on the collaborative glossary tool and the chat rooms. Eva Okunbor noted:

> *The glossary helps us to learn a lot of relevant vocabulary and each entry is reasonably quick to complete. It is also good for revision. Also, the chat-rooms are a fun way to practise writing / conversing in French. The forums are a useful way to post homework / share resources.*

In English, most students liked the opportunity to work at their own pace. The forums and QuickTopic[1] tasks allowed them to see other students' comments. This gave them new ideas and enabled even reticent students to respond. Several returned to the course area to view these ideas as they revised coursework essays later in the course.

1 http://www.quicktopic.com

Where teachers had added links to resources, students appreciated the ability to access these with ease. Several pointed out the fact that this saved them time, as they didn't get caught up in endless trawls of the internet, and it allowed them to feel more confident in their independent study:

> *The availability of resources meant that I spent less time searching the internet or books for help/ resources which allowed me more time to study*

> *The fact that it is accessible at any time ... is very helpful as it means that I don't have to be in school to access certain bits of information. I can easily work at my own pace at home.*

Students also felt that it was useful to have materials available to review and use if they needed to catch up on work for any reason. Some students commented on the benefits for independent study:

> *I am able to work more individually and try to work things out by myself. It is a new and interesting way to learn.*

Asked whether they felt that they needed the teacher less, 8 of the 16 students interviewed felt that they needed the teacher less, and this was also the feeling of 50% of the students taking part in the online survey. They qualified this in several ways. One student pointed out that the teacher was important because the teacher developed the site and 'asked the questions'. Two students felt that they needed the teacher less, but that they knew that they could contact the teacher easily by MSN or email if they needed help. This gave them the confidence to work independently, but also has interesting implications for the way that we see the role of the teacher in future and for work-force remodelling. Several students pointed out that online feedback from the teacher was important.

A concern of teachers was that a certain number of students in a teaching group would not access the site in study lessons or at home, and to some extent this was the case. In most cases, however, the majority of students did access the courses as required. Moodle reports and questionnaire responses suggest that students are, possibly, more likely to use the course areas if they have been used as an integral part of their general programme of study, which is demonstrated by records showing access to the site.

For example, in one group of 19 students who used a course on The Poetry of Wilfred Owen during lessons, 14 accessed the site independently during this programme of study, and most of these students used it during the weeks leading up to their oral examination, reviewing the materials and looking at the extra revision points available. Similarly, the French site, which has been used as an integral part of the study programme, has been

used regularly for independent study. Where teachers used Moodle for extra activities and one-off activities, the results were not so favourable.

This is important for our understanding of the use of technology in education, and supports the view that the focus should be on the learning and not on the technology. Students were inclined to see the value of the courses in terms of consolidation, revision and reflection, which suggests that they advocate a blended approach. One states:

> *I think I need my teacher no more or less than before. I find that I gain my base knowledge and grasp on a topic and its complexities in class, and this method simply rounds off my understanding and helps me reflect on my ideas afterwards.*

While students made many positive comments about the use of Moodle in their learning, they also had some important reservations. 31% said that they enjoyed their learning a bit less using online systems. Only 59% felt that they learnt the same or more using the online units, 41% felt that they didn't learn as much when a unit was taught entirely online. One student commented, 'I feel that I learn the most from debating the meaning of books in class,' and another noted, 'I think that just as much can be learnt from things like group discussions.' Some felt that the 'tasks should have been more interactive'; they had specific irritations with Moodle, such as the student who remarked 'I don't like the fact that you only have 30 minutes to edit your work [in the Forum]'; and, while many were positive about the chat rooms, one said 'I did not like the use of the chat room for group discussions, as there were too many people adding ideas at the same time, making it difficult to understand.'

This was a reservation also held by some of the teachers, and two of the students interviewed were concerned that MSN and chat might be distracting. Students who are very good at the combination of oral discussion and note taking were not as keen on the online discussions, which they found time consuming. One student suggested that perhaps security / confidence is an important consideration for students by commenting:

> *Not all exercises can be managed or marked by a teacher, therefore one does not know whether the answers are correct.*

Important to note are these students' observations:

> *It's nice to have a variety of different ways to learn and Moodle provides one of those, however it's good to have a teacher to answer your questions. It would also be boring to simply self-teach French*

> *It is not the way of learning I would wish to partake in for all my studies, in all subjects, but it allows students to access very useful resources, especially for reading/listening to things online.*

These comments show the importance of variety and a blended approach. At the end of the questionnaire, when asked 'Did the units studied using Moodle or LAMs help you to feel more confident in learning independently?', two thirds said that it had enabled them to feel more confident about independent study, and one third said it made no difference to their confidence. No one said that it made them feel less confident.

When given the opportunity to make general observations about the place of technology in learning, students suggest that they do see technology as a significant tool for developing their learning. One student asserted, 'technology could soon become the new school.' An important comment for this school was, 'Technology is clearly evolving quickly, this is of great advantage to students. ...I believe it is not used enough in school and could be of great advantage to the students as well as the staff.' Another student was 'looking forward to seeing more teacher-made sites (like Moodle) tailored for [his] courses in the future.' The assertion that, 'More subjects should have websites or shared areas that can be accessed from school and home' shows that this student places importance on having access to curriculum materials at home.

In a more developed comment, student Sean Myers alludes to the general impact that technology has had:

> *I think that technology has opened up the boundaries of our learning, giving us the means and encouraging us to share our ideas as a whole, no matter how loud our voice in class may be. We can create a network of resources that we can access either individually or as a group at any time, and [technology] has greatly expanded my ability to research and gather information on any topic and made my approach, opinion and understanding in a multitude of areas far more rounded and informed.*

Myers sees technology as one way amongst several in which to learn:

> *I think that technology in learning these days is very important, because of the evidence that children learn in different ways. By enabling them to use a wide range of learning methods, you are maximising the learning potential, thus creating a better potential education and future for children and this country.*

Final thoughts

Teachers started from the premise that the students represented the Net Generation. This was true in many ways, but from the students' comments, teachers and leaders were able to refine their understanding.

The students' comments have informed not just the planning and lesson design of the individual teachers involved, but also the strategic planning. For while the students were, in many ways, very keen to embrace new technology in their everyday lives, and did see its benefits, they are also the product of an education system which, in spite of student-centred initiatives, still places importance on the teacher, who, for the students, is a source of security. Students are part of an education system that is only just embracing the opportunities provided by technology and, therefore, are in some respects yet to be entirely open to the concept of online learning[1].

For students, as for teachers, there will inevitably be a period of adjustment, during which they become accustomed to learning in different ways and to new ways of communication. Ultimately, at the Greenwich Conference, Sean and Eva were unequivocal advocates for a blended approach, and while they may have been ambivalent in some of their responses to the sessions taught, they were clear about the fact that they expected the use of technologies to form a part of their learning.

References

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1 The Sixth Form at Dartford Grammar School takes at least 80 students a year from other schools. Many of the students involved in the project had attended South London mixed ability schools. They had not all been through the Dartford Grammar School system.

Chapter 14: Is Podcasting an Effective Component of Online Learning?

Liz Bennett & Cheryl Reynolds
University of Huddersfield[1]

Does listening to something, perhaps once, perhaps more than once, perhaps over and over again, mean that it is learned in a way that is useful to the student and that they can retrieve and reuse in an appropriate context at a later date? It is a proposition that seems to conflict with the situated learning theories of researchers such as Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), which assert that learning always lies in the interactions between people, rather than in the content itself or in the minds of the individual learners. The general premise that listening is often more engaging than the written word, and that diction, intonation and inflection add meaning, might be acceptable at face value, but as Hargis and Wilson point out, 'there are currently no examples which clearly indicate proven foundational pedagogical uses and outcomes for podcasts' (2005 p.6). Though the technology is quite recent, it may tend to lead teachers towards outmoded, didactic approaches to delivery, rather than the constructivist, collaborative activities recommended by more recent learning theorists.

This project followed an action research framework within the context of a Foundation Degree in e-Learning at the University of Huddersfield. Podcasts were used to support the delivery of a module on the use of Web 2.0 technologies in Education. The aim was to explore whether, in this context, podcasting could be an effective component of online learning. In particular, the project asked:

1. Do students like listening to educational podcasts?
2. Do students learn from using podcasts?
3. What would be an appropriate set of guidelines for the production of 'good' educational podcasts?

1 This project was carried out as part of the MSc Multimedia and e-Learning at the University of Huddersfield.

The aim of the study was to find the best strategies to employ for a particular course and group of students in order to inform future practice on the course.

Thirteen podcasts were created and hosted on a syndicated blog site. The podcasts contained course materials relevant to the 'Web 2.0 in Education' module. The podcasts were in a range of formats, including audio files created by the module leader, and video files sourced from YouTube. The content focused on the relationship between theories of learning and the use of new technologies for learning and teaching. Some episodes were supplemented with a gapped handout that required the student to fill in the gaps using information gained as they listened. This handout, in pdf format, was syndicated with the podcast. The aim of the handout was to provide students with an activity that would guide and focus them as they listened, thus strengthening their cognitive engagement in the podcast material.

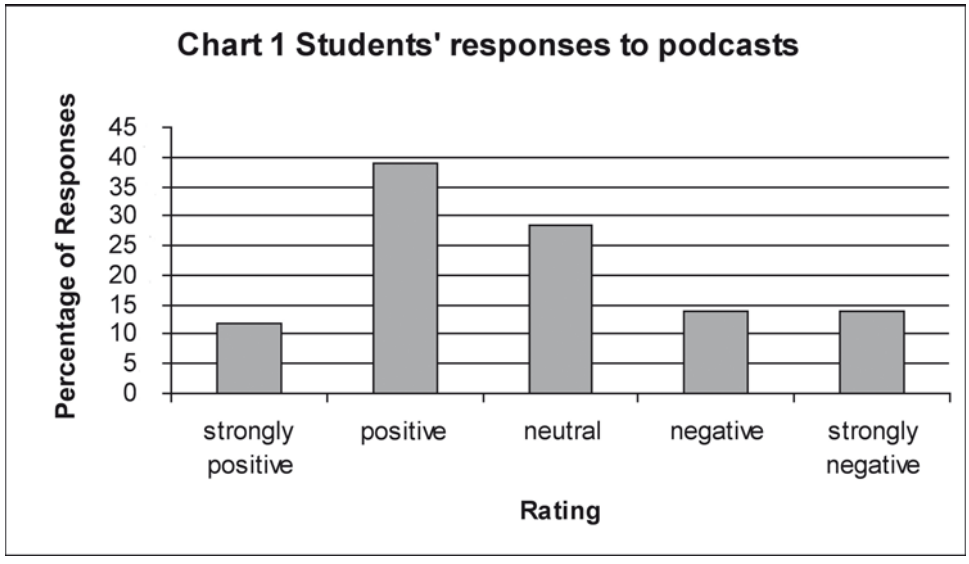
In addition to the podcast episodes, other elements of the course were taught using material delivered in text form via the institution's VLE. This enabled the researcher to compare the information that students had learnt from the podcast with material delivered from text. Asynchronous discussion board activities ran as part of the module delivery. Students discussed course content and their responses to the content.

Students' contributions to the asynchronous discussion board activities were analysed to address the first two research questions: 'Do students like listening to educational podcasts?' and 'Do students learn effectively by listening to podcasts?' Responses were categorised as 'strongly positive', 'positive', 'neutral', 'negative' or 'strongly negative'. The second question was analysed by categorising students' responses to follow-up questions using Bloom's taxonomy (1956). The number of instances of students showing knowledge, understanding, application, synthesis and evaluation was recorded, as was the number of instances of mistakes, misconceptions and omissions. This enabled the effectiveness of the podcasts to be judged in comparison with text-based methods.

Do students like learning from podcasting?

Chart 1 shows that 52% of responses were either strongly positive or positive, whilst 29% were negative or strongly negative. The remaining 19% were neutral. Whilst there were some neutral and negative responses to podcasting, there was a significant tendency towards positive perceptions.

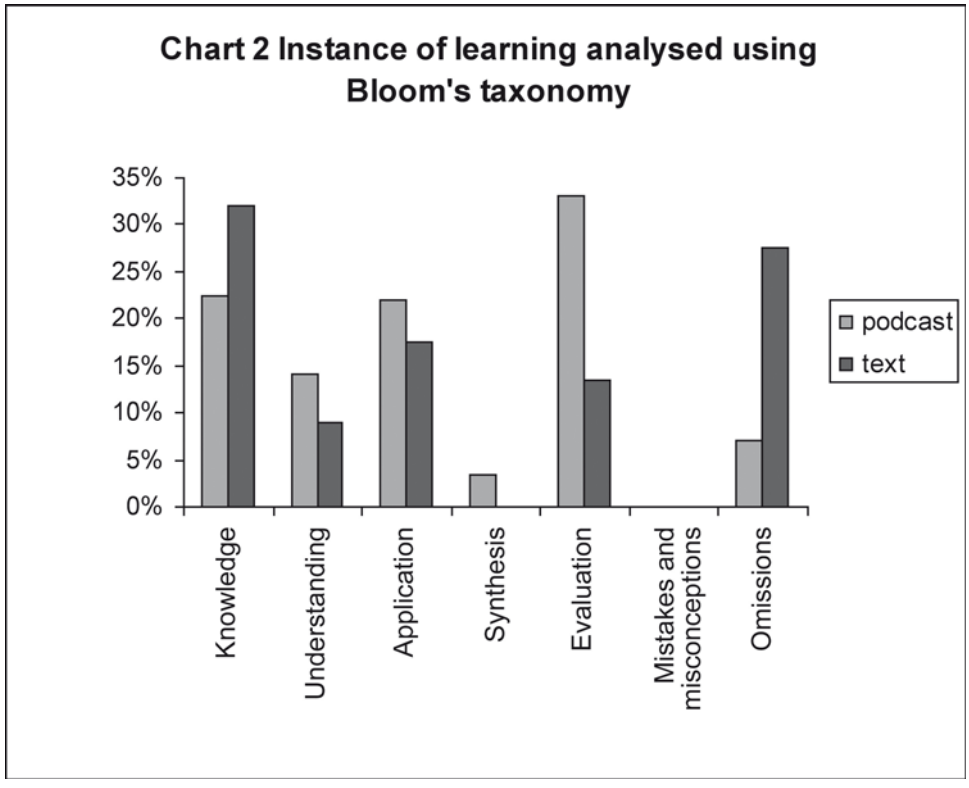
In addition, the negative comments were more frequently elicited in response to a particular episode, in which one of the speakers had a slow and monotonous style of delivery. This is in line with earlier findings on the effect of delivery style on perceptions of listeners (Kallinen and Rajava 2005).



Students involved in this study tended to be negative about the use of gapped handouts to supplement the podcast. This was unexpected, since it was initially felt that providing the gapped handout would make it more interactive by eliciting some cognitive activity through completion of the handout. On investigation, it was found that this expectation was based on an unsound assumption that listeners would be passive without the handout's prompts. A number reported that they routinely made notes on what they heard as a way of engaging more closely with what was being said, and that the gapped handout restricted them to drawing particular conclusions rather than forming their own responses. Because they are quite independent and confident learners, they were happier constructing their own version of the lecture rather than filling in gaps. It is, therefore, possible that a gapped handout would be more important or useful with younger or less confident learners who might benefit from the structure of a handout, whilst more advanced students might find this restrictive and could be given the option to use, or not to use, the gapped handout, depending on preference. This could be a fruitful avenue of further study. Another consideration is that the responses of students to the gapped handout activities may be linked to learning styles. It would be interesting to compare the way that students respond to podcasts, to see if there is any correlation with their preferred style of learning.

Do students learn from listening to podcasts?

Chart 2 shows the frequency with which students exhibited learning at different levels of Bloom's taxonomy (1956) when relying on the primary delivery mechanisms of podcasting compared with text-based methods.



Students did learn from delivery methods that included podcasting. It is difficult to draw definite conclusions from this data because of the small sample of learners involved in the study. However, it appears that there is little difference between the learning that resulted from material delivered via podcasts or text based media. If anything, the podcast material scored higher overall than material from text, and particularly at the higher end of Bloom's taxonomy (synthesis and evaluation).

Interestingly, there were significantly more omissions of important information occurring in students' responses to text-based material than in their responses to the podcast. Since a similar amount of time had elapsed in each instance, the conclusion is that, in this case, students retained more detail from listening to the podcasts than from reading material.

Guidelines for podcasts

Guidelines were developed, based on wider reading about the topic. The two principle papers used were Cebeci and Tekdal (2006) and Kallinen and Rajava (2005):

- Podcasts will be less than 15 minutes long;
- Recordings will be logically sequenced;
- Speech will be interspersed with music;
- Content will be placed in the context of the course of study and of the learner's own working practice;
- Pace of speech will be approximately 143 words-per-minute.

Conclusion

The two key questions asked by this study were: Do the students like learning from podcasts? and: Do they learn effectively from them? Both these questions were answered in the affirmative for this small scale study. The research was stimulated by the belief that podcasts were of limited value in learning due to their delivery supporting an outmoded, didactic approach to teaching and learning. However, this study has shown that podcasts can be used as part of a set of activities that can draw students into a dialogue about their learning, thus supporting a social constructivist pedagogical approach (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989).

Responses to the session

There was plenty of discussion during the session. The speed of the podcast delivery raised comment, and delegates questioned whether 143 words-per-minute was empirically derived. One delegate suggested that 143 words-per-minute was, in fact, too slow to be perceived as engaging.

The figure of 143 words-per-minute was adopted because it was the speed used in a study by Kallinen and Rajava (2005). Kallinen and Rajava compared the news delivered at 143 words-per-minute and 85 words-per-minute in terms of a range of factors including arousal, ease of understanding, and retention of information. They found that 'people tend to respond to the properties of computer mediated speech in the same way as to the properties of real people's voices in face-to-face communication' (2005 p. 371-372), and that faster speech is rated as more arousing, more interesting and invested with more importance than slower speech. They also found that, whilst slow speech was rated by listeners as more understandable, there was no significant difference in the memory performance of subjects for the two different speeds. However, this empirical study did not explore a range of speeds and just compared 143 words-per-minute to 73 words-per-minute. Further research into the speed of delivery for optimum arousal, comprehension and retention of the podcast material is needed.

Delegates also commented that there seemed to be a move towards informal chat and interview styles in the popular radio programmes on Radios 1 and 2, and that this style might make for a more engaging and contemporary format for a podcast.

One student delegate suggested that podcasts might be used to make studying easier by providing ready-made chunks of knowledge that could assist with revision. Other delegates expressed concern at this idea, fearing that podcasts might reduce learning to a simple transmission of information, rather than challenge students' thinking. This is an interesting tension that opens up the differences between a student's strategic perspective and the educator's concerns to facilitate meaningful learning. Within this project we attempted to address this tension by embedding the podcasts within activities in which the students engaged, so that they were not simply passive recipients of the podcast material but needed to interpret and apply the material to their own context.

One delegate wanted the presenter to answer her own question: 'Can podcasts be an effective component of an online course?' The answer was in this case 'yes'. Potentially, podcasts can be used successfully to deliver course material, but this use should be as part of a range of learning activities in which students apply the material to their own context. In this way podcasts can be used as part of a constructivist approach to learning.

Podcast resource

The podcast material produced as a part of this study is found at:
http://web20module189.vox.com/library/posts/

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Chapter 15: Learner Experience of Learning Design

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Barnet College

This summary paper explores ESOL adult students' experience of using the design for learning tool LAMS (Learning Activity Management System) at Barnet College.

Barnet College, a further education college in North West London, undertook a trial of the design for learning tool LAMS with adult ESOL learners as part of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) eLIDA CAMEL[1] Project. This was an innovative step for the College, which had not used learning design tools before. Data was collected from the students, and the results show they are extremely positive about using LAMS.

The practitioners involved in the LAMS pilot considered that LAMS enhanced student motivation, independent learning and participation. They are keen to use LAMS again. Since the initial pilot of LAMS, Barnet College has listened to the students and the practitioners and has this year funded a further pilot with eight more practitioners.

The main impetus for the implementation of LAMS at Barnet College has been the students' and practitioners' views. This is a big innovation in a college where funding is tight and staff are often reticent to take on board new approaches to teaching and learning using technology.

The FE students in this case study were enrolled on an ESOL full-time programme during 2006-7. They came from a variety of countries and cultures and spoke a range of languages. Aged from 19 to 70, they had a diversity of educational experiences prior to enrolling on the ESOL course. They had pre-intermediate to intermediate levels of English, but their computing skills varied from beginner to advanced.

1 e-Learning Independent Design Activities for Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning

The College was a partner in the eLIDA CAMEL Project funded by JISC. As part of the project, three classes of students trialled LAMS during their CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) classes. Using LAMS was a new experience for Barnet College. The students' views were captured in an online questionnaire for eLIDA CAMEL; one of the classes completed an additional paper-based questionnaire, and wrote about their experience of using LAMS; and five students were interviewed about the experience. This produced detailed qualitative data about the students' experience of using LAMS.

Most previous studies that have trialled LAMS looked at the experience from the practitioners' viewpoint, and reported the students' views second hand, such as the Practitioner Trial of LAMS carried out in 2005 (Masterman and Lee, 2005). The Barnet case study captured the students' experiences by asking them directly about their views.

Summary of findings

The three practitioners involved in the LAMS pilot at Barnet College undertook training in the form of two University of Greenwich workshops. The training enabled them to understand the concept of design for learning and to get to grips with authoring in LAMS. Subsequently, the practitioners created and ran LAMS sequences with their students at the College.

Three classes of students used LAMS for different purposes in a blended environment. The subjects of the lessons were as follows:

1. Introduction of a new grammar item;
2. Consolidation of a grammar item;
3. Consolidation of punctuation rules.

The students in all three classes were very positive about their experience of using LAMS. Out of the 34 students who used LAMS:

- 33 students enjoyed using LAMS;
- 26 students enjoyed using LAMS more than the usual way;
- 23 found it easy using LAMS;
- 32 want to use LAMS again.

One of the lessons delivered using LAMS in a blended environment was run the following day with a control class in a face-to-face setting. The students in the LAMS class learnt more than the control class. This was established by comparing the pre- and post-test scores. Additionally, more LAMS students said that they had enjoyed the lesson, worked hard, understood everything they were asked to do and contributed to every activity, compared to students in the control class.

The students who were interviewed rated the different activities in the lesson as either excellent or very good. When they were asked to recommend the best type of course to a fictitious friend, four of the five students proposed a course where LAMS was used sometimes and the fifth student advised a course where the teacher always used LAMS. One student thought that LAMS should be used weekly.

The results of the surveys and interviews could be attributed to the novelty of using LAMS, but one teacher delivered six lessons in one term using LAMS for a variety of purposes and the students' reactions remained positive. This finding supports the experience of Kemnal College of Technology, where LAMS was used for a year and the students still liked using it (Butler, 2004).

The practitioners were also positive about using LAMS and considered that LAMS provides opportunities to create lessons with a variety of activities that are not otherwise available to them. Although the practitioners were not sure how far LAMS enhances learning, they felt it has the potential to do so, and that it certainly increased motivation and independent learning. Despite some technical problems, they want to use LAMS again.

Likely impact on practice

Following the success of the LAMS pilot described above, the College has listened to the views of its students and practitioners, and in 2008 agreed to fund an extended pilot with eight other ESOL practitioners. The college has also funded LAMS International to host LAMS on their server. The practitioners have been trained using the University of Greenwich's workshops to enable them to use LAMS. They will each create and run a LAMS sequence with ESOL learners at the College.

ESOL teachers tend to use student-centred, activity-based approaches to teaching and learning, which is a central concept of design for learning and the raison d'être of tools such as LAMS. The impact on teaching in ESOL will therefore not be around the pedagogical approach adopted by practitioners, but it will have an effect on the planning of learning. One of the practitioners in the initial pilot commented that using LAMS helped him plan his lessons better. This use of LAMS has been documented (Cameron, 2006).

The implementation of LAMS seems to have the biggest impact on students' motivation and encourages independent learning. Using LAMS' collaborative tools in particular, such as the forum and chat, helps to encourage all the students to participate in discussions. This rarely happens in the face-to-face classroom, and this finding has been endorsed by other LAMS studies (Butler, op. cit., Jameson, 2006, Masterman and Lee, op. cit., Russell et al, op. cit.).

Future strategies

Barnet College is gradually adopting e-learning to enhance learning and teaching but progress is slow. The College Information and Learning Technologies (ILT) policy states that it 'will maximise the use of available technology to support student achievement' (Barnet 2005). However, teachers are often reticent to adopt changes, particularly when it comes to embedding ILT. They need to be persuaded of the benefits of ILT and encouraged and supported when they use it.

Using LAMS has been innovative for a college that has not explored the use of learning design tools before. If the second LAMS pilot is successful in the ESOL Department, it can then be rolled out to other departments.

For LAMS or the introduction of other e-learning tools to be successful the College must:

1. Gain the support of SMT;
2. Persuade practitioners of the benefits of using the tool;
3. Invest in training, so that practitioners know how to use the tool;
4. Provide ongoing support for staff, so that they are able to use the tools in their teaching;
5. Share learning designs, so that they can be re-used and re-purposed by other practitioners.

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Chapter 16: Learner Experiences in an Online COP

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This summary paper looks at learner experiences in an international online community of practice, and considers the alignment of learning, technology, community, practice and domain.

Introduction

This case study examined learner experiences in an international, online workshop (www.cpsquare.org) entitled 'Foundations of Communities of Practice.' The workshop was run between January and late March 2008 with 32 participants. These participants, from five different countries and a variety of different types of organisations, were all involved in communities of practice in their organisations.

The learning environment is informed by social learning theory, and in particular by the theoretical outlook of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). It is run by world leaders in the field and uses a combination of different technologies to support learning.

This research explores learner experiences, with a dual focus: first, on social learning through participation in community; and second, on how technology enables the development of the community. The aim is to develop insights into the relationships between communities of practice, advancing technologies and learning.

The interrelationships between community, technology, and the social and emotional dimensions are all explored by analysing responses to questionnaires and interviews with the workshop leaders, mentors (previous participants who take on a mentoring role) and the workshop participants. The researchers (both learners themselves in this workshop) also draw upon their own individual reflective logs about their experiences of learning through this environment, thus adding an insider perspective to the research.

CP Square

The CP Square workshop is informed by a belief in the importance of communities of practice in the organisation of knowledge, learning and innovation. The workshop is run by Etienne Wenger, John Smith and Bronwyn Stuckey and is promoted as 'the community of practice on communities of practice'. People from all over the world take part through an online learning environment that is carefully structured, yet gives participants the opportunity to participate through 'an ecology of interconnected activities' (www.cpsquare.org), enabling them to drive their own participation and learning, and to build on shared practice with others. The workshop is run twice yearly, and this particular workshop was running from January to March 2008, with 32 participants.

The learning environment is built round a structured online space in which careful planning has gone into addressing the social and emotional dimensions of learning, and in which participants are given the opportunity to join in at a number of levels, from reading and reflecting to taking part in group tasks and projects. These include web discussion, instant messaging, chat, email, wiki and teleconferencing. Participants also use a variety of other technical tools to undertake their project work together, including Powerpoint, Digital Images, Facebook, Survey Monkey and Pb Wiki.

Listening to the learner voice

Our approach to listening to the learner voice is firmly rooted in attempting to understand experiences by locating them in the context of the shared values, repertoires and joint practices in which participants are learning in this workshop (Wenger, MacDermott and Snyder, 2002). Our study explored the social aspects of learning, with a particular focus on the interactive and participatory aspects of learning through the development of communities of practice (Barab, Barnett and Squire, 2002).

We did this by using methods that enabled us to develop a holistic understanding of the learning experience through exploring three interrelated aspects of that experience:

1. The role of community in the learning experiences of participants in this workshop;
2. The extent to which technology enables or is a barrier to learning; and
3. The emotional and social aspects of the learning experience.

These three aspects were explored by examining them from a variety of perspectives.

First, we recognised that the learner experience cannot be divorced from the context in which these experiences take place. We therefore interviewed the workshop facilitators in order to explore the pedagogical rationale for this workshop, and the underlying values and outlooks that informed the creation of the workshop. This exploration included developing an understanding of how the workshop facilitators had decided to

use technology to enable the creation of the learning environment and the processes that have informed the development of the learning environment.

To understand the perspective of participants, we used a combination of methods, primarily focusing on data from a questionnaire and from semi-structured interviews.

Finally, we combined the results of the analysis of other participants' perspectives with our own reflective logs as participants in the workshop. Hence a number of data sources were used to enable us to investigate the learning experience from a number of different vantage points, with a focus on community, technology and emotionality.

Discussion of the findings

Although the research is still underway, making it too early to fully report findings, we anticipate rich data that give a useful perspective on the learner experience, with a focus on participation and practice and how this is enabled and/or constrained by technology.

From an insider perspective we have already observed a number of tensions (dualities) in the learner experience online. These dualities are consistent with the findings of Barab et al. (2002), and Wenger (1998): tensions between theory and practice, facilitator and gatekeeper, stability and change. In our research, we explore these and possible additional tensions such as those between reflection and action, peripheral and core participation, breadth and depth, with a view to increasing our understanding of the e-learner experience.

We recognise that this workshop differs in many fundamental respects from many courses in Higher Education. This enables us to explore some key issues such as changing perceptions of the roles of teachers and learners, including the way traditional distinctions between the learner and facilitator may become blurred in this kind of learner-driven environment, in which learning is based upon co-construction round practice.

Impact of research

The CP Square Workshop is innovative both in terms of the theoretical approaches that inform the approach to learning (communities of practice), and in terms of the way that technologies are used to support that learning, with a clear learner-driven philosophy. It has a high standing internationally, as shown by the vibrant international community associated with it and by the strong support for the communities of practice approach in a number of fields, from businesses to the voluntary sector and Higher Education.

We further feel that research on the learner experience in this workshop has potential to offer important insights into how technologies can be used to enable people to learn with and through one another, through participation in a community of practice. It also

has potential to inform the continued development of this particular workshop, as well as the field of e-learning and communities of practice more generally.

Managing change

We anticipate that the research findings will propose strategies for managing change in three areas:

1. Changes to the CP Square Workshop. Our research explores a workshop in which the facilitators are open to and encourage innovation and change. It uses an action research cycle for feeding back findings to facilitators so that changes to the workshop can be based upon feedback from participants.

2. Changes to pedagogical approaches. New social learning technologies have the potential to put learning much more in the control of the learner. In order for educators to understand e-learner experiences, they may need to change their approach to teaching and learning. The research suggests that lessons learned from the CP Square Workshop can be applied in different e-learning contexts.

3. Changes for specific groups of e-learners. This research has implications in terms of highlighting the experiences and e-learning needs of non-traditional students, such as mature distance learners who are undertaking study for Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education.

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Chapter 17: Learning from Learners in Transition

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Introduction

Student retention and progression is a growing area of interest in the Higher Education sector. Work carried out at both Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford over a number of years provides some evidence to suggest that students who receive support in the form of pre-entry materials and structured support mechanisms fare better during the transition period and onwards into the first few critical weeks of term. This session presented feedback from students who had used the materials developed by Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford.

In 2007, the presenters received one year's funding from the HEA e-learning research observatory to evaluate systematic transition support into HE. Both institutions have well developed pre-induction resources for students that aim to develop a framework that facilitates academic and social integration.

This paper will demonstrate how each institution is tackling this important issue, and will provide feedback from students on their experiences. The systems developed at Bradford and Bournemouth have evolved as a direct result of student feedback on their experiences. The conference session encouraged discussion around transition issues and delegates were encouraged to describe good practice that is taking place in their institutions, and that discussion will be reflected in this article.

The learning context

Student retention and progression is a growing area of interest in the Higher Education sector. It is an area that is not only under the scrutiny of Government, but also of other agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). Furthermore, early student withdrawal from HE has a

significant impact on institutional funding and planning, and financial imperatives are an important driver in terms of institutional interest in retention and progression.

It is clear from the literature that early academic and social engagement is critical. There is also growing diversity of intake into the first year, and the experiences at Bournemouth and Bradford have indicated that offering an approach that aligns the pre-induction phase and enhanced induction once at university has a positive impact on students' experience and on their motivation to persist through the first term and onwards.

Our rationale

When Stepping Stones 2HE (Steps) was first developed in 2002, it was felt that moving directly into an online environment would have considerable benefit over other types of resource (e.g. cd, or paper), as it would allow some level of interactivity, particularly in terms of hearing the student voice via the About You survey. In the subsequent years, the increase in internet take up, computer literacy, and broadband width has removed some early concerns about accessibility.

Steps evolved following extensive interviews with first year and final year students about their transition and induction experiences. First year students reported feelings of disorientation, alienation, and felt that some of the ice-breaking activities were patronising. Indeed, even final year students about to graduate recalled their induction vividly: the overload of information, the feeling that everything was so big, unknown and uncertain. It was clear that students stayed 'despite' their transition and induction experiences rather than through positive engagement. And through interviews with students who had left we could establish that, whilst their induction experience was not usually directly responsible for their departure, it was often a tipping factor.

Following consultation with the student body at Bradford on what they would like to see provided prior to arrival, we decided to build our approach around new technologies and e-learning. This enables students to make contact with the University during the crucial initial induction phase. In addition to this, activities to support skills development are provided that in turn help to improve engagement and retention. Social networking, e-portfolios and reusable learning objects have been used to create an integrated package called 'Develop Me!' that supports transition, induction and study skills activities to complement face-to-face work carried out by the Learner Development Unit at the University of Bradford.

The four key technology supported strands of Develop Me! are:

- Pre-entry
    - Social networking (http://developme.ning.com)
    - Expectations survey for new students

- Post-entry
    - SaPRA: a personal development planning tool built using an e-portfolio (PebblePAD)
    - Reusable learning objects which provide skills development opportunities.

Our approach focuses on enhancing social engagement and building networks between students prior to arrival, as well as encouraging early academic engagement during the crucial first weeks. Develop Me! has grown out of the work that has been undertaken at Bournemouth over the last six years.

Hearing what students have to say about their experiences during the process of transition to University, the impact of induction on their first few weeks and their expectations of what University will be like, has enhanced Bournemouth and Bradford's approaches to developing online materials which support this process of initial engagement with the institution.

Both presenters have worked closely with students for a number of years, and hearing students' anecdotal feedback about their first few weeks, and how they felt about that process led to the development and implementation of Stepping Stones 2HE (Bournemouth) and Develop Me! (Bradford).

The student voice has been elicited through questionnaires, focus groups, and in excess of 100 individual interviews over a period of 5 years. Work with academic colleagues in faculties has further enabled the student voice to be heard. The impact of this feedback has been considerable. Alongside creating the online materials, Bournemouth established a First Year Experience task group and 'the first year experience' is now in the strategic plan 2012; and Bradford have established a First Year Experience forum, chaired by the PVC Learning and Teaching, which meets monthly to discuss arising issues and implement changes to support students.

Our findings

Our approach has been to learn more about student expectations prior to arrival at university and our findings are clearly identifying how and where students struggle with the often difficult transition to HE. We have also found that students are highly motivated to begin scholarly activities during their pre-enrolment phase (previously articulated in requests such as wanting to obtain a copy of a reading list), and we believe that this active and productive early engagement has helped develop early academic integration and relationship with their studies.

Overall, our key findings are that engaging with the resources that have been developed improves confidence and reduces anxiety about starting at University, or, importantly,

it has allowed individual students a safe space to air their concerns. It has also led to a more productive, relevant and purposeful induction experience and is being closely linked to a more coherent and fully integrated first year experience.

We have also discovered that concerns regarding accessibility, and availability of computers and internet, and cultural issues, have generally not been realized. There had been concern that particular 'groups' of students - for example, mature female returners - would be disenfranchised and not engage with online activities; however, we have not perceived this to be the case, and indeed the opportunity to interact online whilst still in the safety and comfort of their own home surroundings appears to work well.

The student voice

Providing the students with the opportunity to share or communicate their thoughts about coming to university to us, prior to their arrival here, has been uniquely illuminating. For example, at Bournemouth we now have six years of data from our 'About You' survey within Stepping Stones 2HE, which is currently under analysis.

We have been able to identify the socio-emotional impact - for example, the desire to make friends as quickly as possible (and what this means in terms of self and identity); and the academic-emotional impact - for example, students' feelings of self-worth about engaging in university study:

> *I am nervous about leaving home, meeting new people and whether or not the people on my course are of a similar ability as me.*
>
> *I also want to meet new friends and have fun while learning. I am a bit nervous of moving into a house with people I don't know but once I got there I should be ok*
>
> *I am really looking forward to making new friends. I'm nervous and excited about leaving home and being more independent. I am worried about getting lost on my first day at the university.*
>
> *I am very excited about coming to university and for new experiences. I am looking forward to being more independent, meeting new people. I am slightly nervous about being away from my family since they are so far away and it's first time being away from home but I think once I make friends and settle down university would be great.*

The Survey has also allowed us to identify students with additional learning needs that they may not yet have disclosed:

- Balancing study and personal time;
- Acceptance by peers and tutors;
- Easy to make acquaintances, but difficult to make close friends;
- Hope that learning support unit will give the help needed to overcome any difficulties caused by dyspraxia.

Students have also been encouraged to express their expectations, not only in terms of what they expect from the institution but also, importantly, their expectations of themselves as well:

> *I expect to work hard and to do the best I can. I aim to pick up skills that will equip me to become a computing professional. I believe that the teaching staff will be supportive and I expect they will push me to the best of my ability*
>
> *I am not really sure what to expect since university is completely new experience for me and I have no older brothers or sisters to see what it's really like. However, I have spoken to lots of people about university and they have all told me how great it is so I am expecting to have time of my life.*
>
> *My expectations of myself are to stay focused, do well and meet new people. From the university I hope for a warm welcome and relaxed understanding atmosphere.*

Student responses and questions have also allowed us to identify students who may potentially be at risk of early withdrawal, with the special advantage that we have been able to monitor their social and academic engagement from day one.

The pleasure that was engendered by the programme for both students and staff is evident in the following comments:

Students:

> *I have to say that the Stepping Stones idea is really good, it really made me feel part of the University before I had even arrived and was a nice introduction into studying again for me.*
>
> *Steps, fantastic. But could have done with it earlier, a month was just not enough!*
>
> *Useful and enjoyable for the start of a new course.*

Staff:

> *There was a general feeling that Steps had been fun, enabled group bonding at an early stage, and that the students had been keen to participate and create an end product.*
>
> *All academics were impressed at the standard of work that had been completed in such a short space of time and the vast amount of knowledge that students had gained. In one programme, the students demonstrated their work to second year students who were amazed at what the first years had produced. There was a genuine 'buzz' around the School.*
>
> *For us, the commitment shown to working together having only been recently introduced to each other was a delight.*
>
> *We had a great time today and they did good work and presentations. We worked from ten until one o'clock and the students put together a complex concept with little to no background from us.*

As part of the HEA e-learning observatory, a major online survey of first year students was conducted including students from both institutions. This survey encouraged students to think about whether the pre-induction resources had improved their confidence about starting at university, and to reflect on their changing confidence levels during the first year:

> *The forums are great as you can meet other people before beginning University. It makes you feel less nervous. [student]*
>
> *It is simple and a friendly use program its online resources are very useful [student]*
>
> *[I like] being able to meet and talk to people before starting [student]*
>
> *This [Develop Me!] is great. I am so pleased that you have set this up and it's an easy way for me to talk to the new students and get to know them better [staff member]*
>
> *I thought I was too old to do all this [social networking] but it's not as hard as you think and the students obviously seem to benefit from it [staff member]*
>
> *You find out more about yourself and realise your weakneses and strengths and realise your potential*

saPRA allows you to look at the different aspects of studying at university - degree level.

it made me consider lots of different aspects of my own learning and highlighted my learning needs.

it got me thinking which is really good. i have also got a vague idea of just how much IT skills i should have developed

Impact on practice

Impact on practice has been considerable. The move to a much more academic focus during induction week has led to re-thinking how information is provided to students (some beforehand in the pre-induction resources, and some afterwards, during a phased and contextualised induction process). The online surveys completed by students pre-induction have also allowed a discourse between staff and students and a better understanding of the expectations, and previous experiences of our students.

Proposed strategies for managing change

After successful pilots at Bournemouth and Bradford, the approaches are being implemented across both institutions. Our strategies for managing change are centred on web based applications to support the initial transition and induction needs of students. Building on work emerging from Bradford about a new typology of digital learners, both Develop Me! and Stepping Stones 2HE are actively addressing the diverse needs of modern students.

Our empirical research is enabling us to ground our strategies and approaches in theory, and we have found that by carefully listening to the needs of our students we can address these needs effectively. Incorporating appropriate emerging technologies within our approach ensures that we keep our materials fresh, and can engage with students in a way that enthuses them. Above all, however, our personal approach ensures that students feel cared about and supported, which in turn helps them to make a more effective transition to University.

Conference discussion

During our workshop at the symposium, discussion centred around how to make this type of support available within other institutions. We discussed what type of approach may be needed to be taken to engage students and staff to ensure they were on board, so that the approach was successful. Some colleagues were concerned about the levels of work in moderating the online groups, and we discussed how students might be utilized to provide support to peers, rather than the burden of work falling on the shoulders of staff. Other issues which were raised covered academic staff 'buy-in' and how to embed the approach within programmes.

The issues raised during our session were the usual responses we have faced when explaining to staff what our approach is. It was interesting to note how many colleagues noted issues of time pressure in limiting their ability to set new systems up to support students. We both feel, however, that the initial time commitment involved in establishing these approaches is beneficial, as it means that the students are more aware and better informed about the process of learning at University, and are therefore more able to cope with the demands placed on them once they arrive. In addition, the work we have done around expectations has meant that our materials can be refined and honed in subsequent years in order to make these issues more explicit for students and therefore reduce the number of questions received.

The questions following the presentation indicated a lot of interest in this area. Many institutions are now looking into ways of improving students' early experiences, and this article briefly describes our approach. We have concentrated on the e-learning aspects of this approach, and have reflected on the student voice in order to give an idea of how early online engagement improves confidence and motivation.

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Chapter 18: Listening to Learners on the PLE

Roger Rees, Miles Metcalfe, Ruth Catlow & Luke Ngakane
Ravensbourne College

This paper reports on our findings to date from the JISC-funded Learner Integration at Ravensbourne (LIN-R) project. This project is funded under the user-owned technologies strand of the e-learning programme, and is a demonstrator of making the institution's e-learning platforms more useful to learners who increasingly wish to make use of their own technology and extra institutional services as well as institutional ones. This involves asking questions such as: To what extent does the notional PLE (Personal Learning Environment) resonate with learners? Is it just a three-letter acronym, doomed to be discarded when a more fashionable technology catches the eye of the e-learning industry? What is the relationship between learner-as-learner, and learner-as-user? How personal can a personal learning environment be that is scaffolded and constructed – and how useful to the learner?

Background

Ravensbourne College is a specialist institution with a strong vocational focus in a discipline area (Design and Communication) that is undergoing rapid, disruptive change. Exploring the ramifications of that change on professional practice requires a partnership between learner and educator for two reasons:

1. Learners and practitioners bring differential perspectives and contexts to understanding it - for example, a learner may see Facebook as an online space to meet with friends, whilst an educator may have more concerns about privacy, and the commodification of human relationships, but may also be interested in social networking as a platform for reputation management.

2. Learners may well have more practical skills suited to a post-transformation world.

To some extent, the traditional status/authority hierarchy doesn't map onto current trends in technology usage (the educator may be the technical novice, the learner confident in the use of TheirSpace). In that sense, learners and practitioners meet increasingly as equals. In this project, we conceptualise the PLE as the sum total of feeds and flows that a learner aggregates – perhaps using a desktop aggregator like NetNewsWire, or a web-based aggregator like Google Reader, or, in a less sophisticated example, simply the collection of 'stuff' on the learner's laptop.

Project description

The overall aim of the work described here has been to identify and apply approaches that support learners' development more systematically, and encourage them increasingly to reflect upon and integrate their learning. Also, to do this within a context that is meaningful and can support them in making sense of their different learning experiences in relation to their own developing identity and direction.

This is being put into practice specifically by developing a framework for students to develop online profiles within the context of Personal and Professional Development Units. The design intention is to encourage students to record progressively the development of their work and working process, to reflect on this and their learning, and to share and contextualise this with peers, staff and wider communities.

PPD encourages students to recognise, and participate in, communities of practice that will form a crucial part of their professional lives. It is, therefore, a very suitable vehicle to support them in making effective use of digital technologies that are an increasingly important part of engaging in these. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for being both an information consumer, and an information producer, and to acquire skills which will equip them for this.

We are aiming to develop a continuum from recording development privately, through to representing and sharing this with others – from peers and staff to wider communities – and finally to accomplish this as part of the process of an increasingly professional collaboration. This has led us to adapt the idea of a PLE, as part of a learning design that encourages the integration of different areas and processes of a learner's experience. For us this means integrating processes and activities that are often seen as conflicting, notably reflection with self-representation with assessment, thus aligning key aspects of the curriculum.

We have aimed to support learners to develop a workflow that includes aspects of learning that are often marginalised: recording the development of their work and ideas, for example; or representing their contribution to collaborative projects; or their success in supporting peers. The aim has further been to use this to encourage learners to synthesise their reflections as part of an online profile, representing their learning

journey and themselves as reflective practitioners. This also is intended to encourage connections between different areas, notably theory and practice.

Our project is not complete yet, so our findings are a work in progress. What we have found so far challenges some of the conventional Net Generation rhetoric. For example, we suspect that some of the wildest excesses of this rhetoric are comparable to confusing being able to work a VCR remote control with being able to build a VCR. We would argue that learners' facility with computers doesn't represent a shift in a generation's understanding of the world. Few of our learners used aggregators, and some had difficulty with email. This goes some way to explain the popularity of all-things-in-one-place platforms like Facebook.

In practice, learners do not currently engage in using technology as an integrated part of their learning. In fact, generally speaking, learners are not even aware of the possibilities of a PLE. They take an instrumental or functional view of technology on the desktop – that is, they want to improve their Photoshop skills or FinalCut Pro skills. Learners have to be further supported to learn about learning, and this can take considerable time, resources and planning from educators and institutions.

Significantly, our students tend to see technology as a set of tools to support their design / production process, and not really to support them in learning or developing collaborative practice. Also, there is a possibly related tendency for many to see the internet as being useful for showcasing their best work, especially towards the end of their degree, but not so much for collaborating, or reflecting, on the process of the development of either their work or working practices.

By and large, our learners' expectations of e-learning systems are unsophisticated – a repository for lecture notes, preferably available in advance of lectures, and in no way a replacement for what they perceive as the 'real' activities of practice-based education – programme-making and studio culture.

However, in discussion with educators, and in the right context, learners did often recognise the professional applications of social software, and began to consider it in a deeper and more sophisticated manner. Educators, for the most part, did not enjoy a reciprocal boost in their confidence with using software tools!

If the PLE as aggregator is a realistic technology (it certainly is from the technical standpoint), its full potential lies in the future – it is not a technology that is self-evident (or even iteratively evident) to learners. Indeed, contemporary thinking on the PLE, like much contemporary thinking on education itself, is distant from learners' conceptions. Also, whilst co-working between educational practitioners and learners can rapidly enrich concepts of learning, these enriched concepts do not easily translate into technological

'fixes'. That said, scaffolding learners' contextualisation of technology does not lead to alienation or anomie.

We suggest that learning technology is best introduced to learners with its underpinning rationale and philosophical biases made explicit. We suggest, also, that learners are empowered to think critically about the technical infrastructure they are provided with. This does not mean that e-learning should reduce itself to the learners' expectations – but that learners should not have their expectations defeated by the technologisation of their learning experiences.

In general, managers and practitioners should not be overcome by technological hype, nor over-awed by software-industry-friendly rhetoric about epochal change. An informed pedagogy of web 2.0 does not start from the presumption that the Net Generation changes everything – and continues to understand that the technological instrumentation of learning is neither explicit nor self-evident.

We have identified, in line with other JISC supported research, that the level and sophistication of student engagement with social software and web 2.0 tools can be overestimated. For example, very few of our students have used any form of aggregation. In addition, their awareness of the value and uses of social software for anything beyond social interaction, and their ideas about managing an online identity, are limited. It also seems, at least initially, that there is an overlap between the level of independence and maturity of learners and their approach to using technology and engaging with communities of practice. This highlights the need to scaffold this process for students and staff even more fully than we initially thought, but it also re-enforces the value of this for independent learning.

The engagement of students has been varied. Some have engaged with the learning outcomes, with content, and in using the tools in ways that are very encouraging and that represent an initial validation of some of the principles of the learning design. Others engaged less fully in one or more aspects, and this highlighted the need to integrate the innovations into the whole learning and teaching approach.

For example, where students were encouraged to identify examples of designers using the Internet, and there was structured discussion of this within forums and classes, many were able to recognise the opportunities offered by web 2.0 developments for reflection and public representation. Where students were using their PPD work to help them to get work placements, the desire to show only their most polished work and to focus on finished products tended to limit the willingness of some learners to engage in deeper reflection, particularly about their working process. On the other hand, this connection was motivating, and encouraged students to put in considerable effort. Issues such as

this highlight the need for the wider aims of the learning design to be more transparent to learners and embedded in the unit and course as a whole.

Challenges

We have found that user-owned technology presents challenges along three specific dimensions, which we can characterise as pedagogical, technological and social.

Pedagogical challenges

The pre-eminent pedagogical problem is making effective use of user-owned technology. Although our project is demonstrating that we can add a façade to the College's systems to enhance the usefulness of user-owned technology in conjunction with institutional systems, the institution hasn't yet developed a general pedagogy of user-owned technology. For example, if it can be safely assumed that learners are equipped with a laptop or web-capable smartphone, it is critical to understand how learning activities can change to take advantage of that capability. By and large, and almost by default, these opportunities tend to go un-addressed. Even simple innovations that harness possibilities such as spontaneous backchannels and Wikipedia fact-checking are slow to emerge, and learners' interaction with their devices in tutor-led situations continues often to be perceived as disruptive.

Technological challenges

Technological problems range from on-going issues with the stability of a wireless network that has a large number of simultaneous users (a particular problem in studios, seminar, and lecture rooms), to a shortage of physical spaces that appropriately support user-owned technology. However, the College's service departments are engaged with the institution's strategy to move to a more 'user-owned' culture.

More interesting are the technological issues surrounding extra-institutional Web 2.0 platforms. We can sketch out an idealised 'architecture' for a PLE that integrates extra-institutional resources: an architecture where RSS and OpenID would predominate, and 'semantic' markup would enrich information flows. However, the institution is not ready to become an OpenID provider, and Microformats and RDFa are yet to become mainstream technologies. This creates a PLE experience that has an 'experimental' edge – appealing to some, but frustrating to the majority, especially those who still see e-learning as a peripheral or supporting activity.

Social challenges

Social issues arise from skills or capability related issues, or from prior technology choice. One of the strengths of the VLE is the simple fact that it is a container for learning activities. Although it is possible to plug in, through embeddable widgets, RSS, or simple hyperlinks, content from almost any source, it is also eminently possible to create a worthwhile learning experience entirely bounded by the VLE – and this becomes

increasingly compelling as the difficulty of integration increases. Also, both learners and practitioners have made pre-existing extra-institutional technology choices. These choices may be sub-optimal for integrating into a PLE.

Conclusions

The project so far has established the value of developing a PLE model. However, it has also established, as discussed, that to do this successfully involves re-considering the role of the institution and academic practitioners. A personal learning environment must be built by the learner and supported by their staff and the context they understand themselves to be in. The extent to which students are prepared to do this is variable and particularly dependent on learning design, staff skills and preparedness. The recognition of the opportunities of user-owned technology, and tools and models from social software and Web 2.0, can play a part in this, but only if they are accompanied by fundamental changes, notably the embedding of the relevant values and principles in the whole of the curriculum and approach to learning and teaching.

We have conducted focus groups for learners to understand better their perceptions of institutional systems, and their use of extra-institutional technology – and to gauge their reactions to the PLE model we are articulating. As noted above, learners expect a high degree of integration from institutional, or institutionally advocated systems. We note in passing that the designers of Facebook have had an important insight in this respect. Generally, learners do not like to integrate information for themselves – they would prefer everything they needed to be available 'automatically'. Learners are happy to go to sources of content on the web, provided they are notified of updates. Few learners use RSS for this purpose, and most described an update mechanism as email-like: 'Facebook email notification when something's changed'. However, students by and large complain about College email notifications as they cannot opt-out of this system. Students themselves use Facebook for information sharing 'because everyone is on there every day', but they are divided about whether they would like to receive information from tutors/the VLE through Facebook. Students value forums and discussions on the VLE, and it is these discussions that engage them – otherwise they will check content 'if my tutor tells me they've put something on'.

Other key lessons include the fact that personalisation and the model of a PLE present considerable problems of scale. These can be addressed by standardisation, though only at the expense of personalisation (for example, 'you can choose any blogging system you like so long as it's from our approved list'). Even a limited choice creates an increased support burden, particularly where learners are being directed to systems rather than integrating their own user of tools into their learning activities. In the absence of effective support, learners converge on 'lowest common denominator' approaches to integrating their activities – hyperlinking and copy-and-pasting. In fact, copy-and-paste

is the most widely used integration technique. For example, learners report pasting the contents of Moodle courses or individual Word documents into Facebook.

Furthermore, learners have an expectation that institutional systems are integrated, or at least present the illusion of integration. Decoupling the learning experience across a range of platforms chosen either by learner or institution appears to learners as though the institution is opting out of one of its key roles. To an extent, this contrasts with the learners' own use of systems – many students may have commented that they like Facebook because 'everything is there' and ended up using Facebook's chat and messaging features in place of instant messaging and email alternatives.

Another key lesson is that academic practitioners should have, themselves, an underlying model of a PLE that exceeds 'a collection of your stuff on your computer'. This should be coherently articulated, with concrete examples of tooling and tool use, embedded in a clear rationale. In general, learners will not 'take' to a model without considerable contextual scaffolding. Through the overall model described above and other outputs, such as a tools matrix, the project and team are supporting the development of this. Clearly, however, further work needs to be done in this area.

Finally, we have come to recognise that whichever coherent model might be proposed, it is vital to consider how this relates to learners' (or practitioners') own preferred software landscape.

Chapter 19: The RCN Learning Zone

Jonathan Jewell & David Mathew
Royal College of Nursing

This brief paper summarizes the experience of the RCN participants in a poster presentation at the e-learning@greenwich conference.

When we heard that the Greenwich conference was about 'learning from the learner' we knew we had something important to offer. With 400,000 members, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) prides itself on developing high quality, evidence-based learning to support the needs of healthcare workers across the UK and around the World. Ten years of e-learning practice have provided an insight into learner experience unparalleled by an organisation on this scale.

The RCN presentation was a large (2A0) poster flanked by a number of smaller 'snapshot' posters, and occupied a prominent position near the entrance to the event. The content of presentation focused on how the RCN's Learning Zone (an online implementation platform) was driven by the experience of learning from learners. This included a background to the origins of the Learning Zone and our work on a new and improved evaluation strategy (which took into account all of the data we had from learners' experiences with the Learning Zone, and was dealt with in a systematic way). We also included personal statements from our learners, which comprised positive comments and suggestions for the future.

It was immediately apparent that our poster had a perfect fit with the overall theme of the conference, although we were somewhat surprised by the scarcity of other poster presentations. We were able to demonstrate, with the poster, what our organisation offered in terms of learner resources and the individual learner's experience, and we thought that many other organisations would seize this particular nettle. However, it did mean that our poster was a focal point for many of the conference's delegates.

The main points of discussion were:

- How the RCN drives e-learning and provides valuable opportunities for learners;
- How other organisations are engaged in the same idea; and
- What challenges these organisations face.

Next year's conference is of no less interest to the RCN. Our success at this year's conference showed that there is a clear interest in, and demand for, learning more about the RCN's offerings and ways of working. Some of the key messages we took back were:

- A poster is good, but a poster linked to a presentation is better. We are looking forward to our slot on the agenda at the next conference.

- A poster has got to look professional or the wrong messages are sent out. We were pleased by the number of compliments the poster received, recognising as they did that a good deal of work had gone into the preparation.

- We were proud to represent the RCN as a flagship provider for e-learning at such a prestigious event.

Correspondence

For further information, our website is at: http://www.rcn.org.uk/learningzone.

If you have any questions, or would like to receive a copy of the poster, please contact: learning.zone@rcn.org.uk.

Chapter 20: Policy Perspectives

Nigel Ecclesfield, Becta
Fred Garnett, London Knowledge Lab

For the e-learning@greenwich/conference 2008, we provided a review of *Harnessing Technology: Leading Next Generation Learning 2008-14,* the Government's new e-learning strategy that was published on July 2 2008[1]. This is designed to be a key educational policy through to 2014, and, in one way or another, will affect us all. In terms of the presentation at the Conference, we largely focused on a description of the policy - which was then only a few days old, and at that time barely publicized to practitioners. We explained how it was constructed and how the delivery of the strategy was planned.

At the time we included a brief analysis of the strategy, but this paper provides the opportunity to go a little deeper. Consequently we have included a survey of reactions to it by participants at the session, the 'Policy Forest' activity, which is based on analysing the policy in terms of economic outputs, technology assumptions and learner-centredness.

Background to *Harnessing Technology*

Let's begin by discussing the underpinning ideas of *Harnessing Technology*. As stated in the Ministerial forward, there are clear policy concerns behind the Government's plans for using technology in education:

> *There is a significant agenda for change for the education and skills system over the coming years. For our country to compete in the future we need to significantly improve our learning, upgrade our skills and develop our knowledge and understanding. Both the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) see technology as a vital tool to help achieve our ambitions as set out in the* ***Children's Plan, World Class Skills and Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value****.*

1 Becta, 2008 *'Harnessing Technology: Leading Next Generation Learning 2008-14'*, http://news.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=37361&page=1658&catID=1633

Harnessing Technology Strategy should be 'aligned with the needs of learners of all ages, parents and employers' (Becta 2008, 3-4).

Agenda for change

In examining this ministerial 'agenda for change' we can distinguish, beyond the educational policy context, five overarching policy targets:

1. Ending economic underachievement i.e. producing a world-class economy for 2020, underpinned by a world-class education system;
2. Public sector reform – return on investment, demand-led services;
3. Negatively defined groups, for whom additional support is required e.g.
   - NEET status (Not in Employment, Education or Training);
   - 'Hard to Reach' (socially excluded in some way);
   - Disadvantaged;
4. Target setting (the government's target-based approach to governing);
5. Avoiding controversy in education reforms in order to generate consensus – examples of this approach include the response to 'Tomlinson', otherwise known as the final report of the working group on 14-19 reform[1], resulting in the continued focus on 'A' Level achievement as the benchmark for the system.

This suggests a clear continuation of the managerial approach to the educational system that has characterised the last twenty years of educational policy, with an arguable bonus in this case that success, for ministers, in a more efficient public sector, is aligned with current target setting. This means that Government itself should take these targets seriously. However, this government lacks nothing in being thorough-going in target setting and it has further educational priorities which underpin this strategy, not least moving the school leaving age up to the age of 18. Key priorities and initiatives affecting the e-strategy are:

1. Compulsory Education to 18 years;
2. Academic targets – 5 GCSEs (Level 2 - supporting economic competitiveness (Leitch[2]));
3. Diplomas – developing employment links direct from schooling;
4. Changing the role and status of FE colleges – 'Raising Expectations'[3];
5. Preparing learners for the changing world of work – Leitch;
6. Changing role and status for Local Authorities and LSC, 14-19 – Raising Expectations.

1 DfES, 2004 '14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform' DfES, London.

2 Leitch A, 2006 'Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – World Class Skills' HM Treasury, London.

3 DCSF and DIUS 2008 'Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver' e-consultation: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/Raising%20Expectations%20pdf.pdf

Focus on preparing for work

The strong focus on preparing people for work has been Gordon Brown's hallmark, and was shaped by the papers he commissioned when he was at the Treasury, most notably what is known as the Leitch Report. This was clearly evident in a passage on the Skills agenda for those over 18: it should be 'employer-led' and 'employment focused' (p18) with an agenda for HE institutions concerning 'higher level' skills. Adult education remains, tragically, narrowly defined with 'funding targeted towards numeracy, literacy, ICT' rather than socially inclusive learning (p17). This is emphasised by the fact that education for personal development becomes, beyond basic skills, a cost to be borne by individuals – through increased income coming from employment opportunities opened up to those with Level 2 qualifications and beyond. This point has recently been emphasised in the DIUS response to the 'Raising Expectations' discussion[1]. Wider participation is still seen to be achieved by 'expanding higher education, through work-based and FE-led HE qualifications' which will pose interesting challenges in terms of the financial efficiency of our Universities.

One potentially bright area was the 'Consultation on informal adult education'[2], which took a usefully broad view of adult and community learning (including media), and was seen as setting out 'the options being considered by the Government'. DIUS reported back on this Consultation on October 23 2008 with Secretary of State John Denham emphasizing both that the Leitch Report (for the Treasury) guides policy, and that the work-based 'Train to Gain' initiative has monopolized the funding in this area. Our analysis contends that Education policy is actually economic policy and John Denham explicitly highlighted this in his Guardian interview of October 21 2008[3].

So the government is being proactive in two areas: first, by providing education for all up to age 18, combined with a raised educational target up to Level 3 qualifications for all; and second, by providing a range of strategies for getting people into work after leaving education. What does this twin pronged approach mean in terms of the e-strategy?

The e-confident system

The overarching theme of the e-strategy is that of delivering the 'e-confident system'. This is to be achieved by moving from e-enabled to e-capable to e-confident, as in the following diagram:

1 DIUS 2008 'Skills Strategy' web page http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/skillsstrategy/

2 DIUS 2008 'Informal Adult Learning: shaping the way ahead' – consultation http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/con_091008_informal_adult_learning.html

3 Kinston P 2008 'Forces gather against Labour on adult learning' (interview with John Denham), The Guardian, 21 October 2008 [retrieved from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/21/adult-learning]

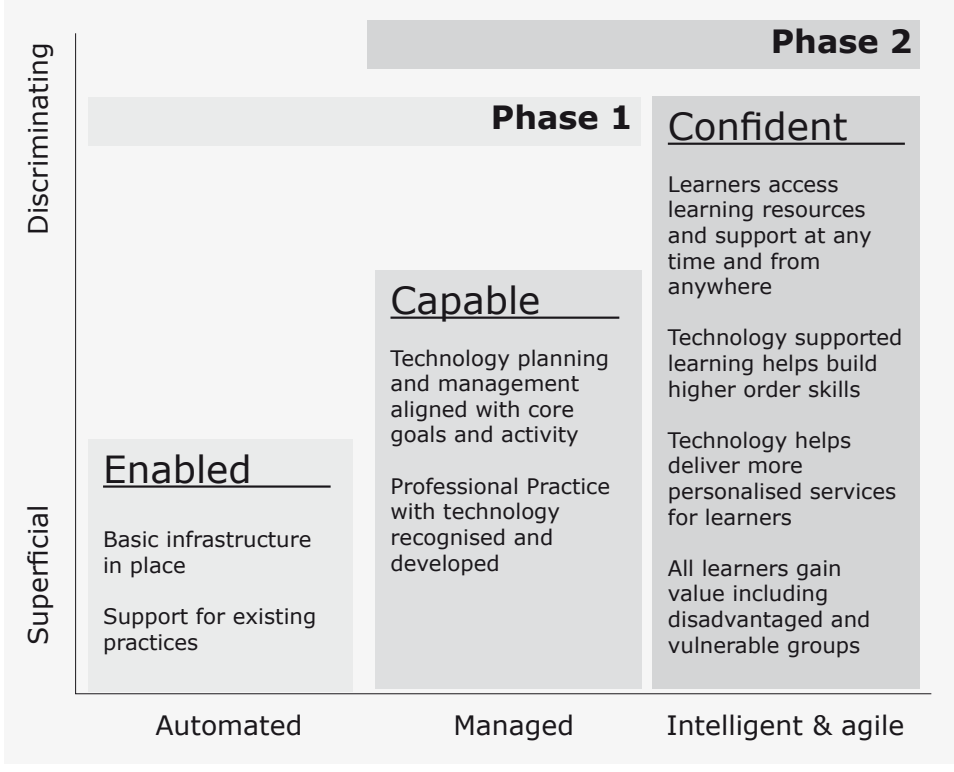

Diagram derived from Harnessing Technology p17

The government breaks this down into five elements:

i) Learner Entitlement (concerned with closing the achievement gap);
ii) Engaging the family and informal learning (which are different);
iii) Providing professional tools for teachers (as in Laurillard's Power Tools[1]);
iv) Mobilising technology leadership (a greater role for technology champions drawn from the system);
v) Sustainable personal technology.

There is nothing specific in the policy about improved achievement up to age 18, unless it is through increased parental pressure, and nothing specifically about supporting entry into work, unless it is through the 14-19 Diploma, which is not, however, addressed directly within the policy.

1 Laurillard D 2007 'Position paper for Foresight workshop – three propositions' http://www.lkl.ac.uk/rnoss/foresight/dianalaurillard.doc

Contribution of the elements to the overall objective

Conceptually, the five elements of *Harnessing Technology* come together as the drivers that will deliver personalised learning, which is defined as being about tailored content, flexible pathways (such as a Diploma) and personalised assessment.

Leadership is seen as a driver for innovation that should be party to developing 'joined-up information'; parents are seen as acting on informed demand as part of improving access; and teachers are seen as being involved in developing a self-improving workforce, which together would develop a 'world-class' system. As these key elements are pulled together in the policy, they seem to move away from real learning experiences. But the following is a description of how these elements are seen to work together from a 'system' perspective.

High-level policy impacts (are driven by):

- the System wide attributes (of an e-confident system);
- which are achieved by the System capabilities (of stakeholder and partner e-capabilities);
- (which are developed by) the change programme interventions;
- which are the Delivery programmes under the five 'change' themes highlighted in the e-strategy.

Or, to put it another way, *Harnessing Technology* is the technology tip of the iceberg of education policy and system change programmes, as we shall see when we look at the new ministries and their responsibilities.

Supporting the changing context - DIUS, DCSF & TG

A significant change in the policy landscape occurred in 2007 when the DfES was broken up into the Department for Children Schools and Family (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS).

DCSF policy is concerned with all learners up to 19 years old, with the leaving age being raised to 18 in 2010, and is focused on the delivery of the Children's Plan[1] which is concerned to:

a) Narrow the gap and raise educational attainment;
b) Improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people;
c) Increase the number of young people on the path to success.

DIUS policy is concerned with developing a population that has the skills to engage with the Knowledge Economy. It plans to achieve this by:

1 DCFS 2007 'The Children's Plan: building brighter futures' - http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan/

a) Improving the skills of the population throughout their working lives;
b) Building social and community cohesion;
c) Strengthening the Further and Higher Education systems.

However, the departmental restructuring, and these priorities that follow from it, are also part of a broader cross-government efficiency plan called 'Transformational Government'[1] that looks to achieve:

a) Service transformation (by department);
b) Workforce remodelling (within departments);
c) A value-for-money return on investment (at less cost across government).

So, in short, delivery of the policy will be led by the DCSF, with significant responsibilities for DIUS concerning Skills training, alongside an underlying concern to cut the governmental costs in delivery.

National Education Objectives – policy level impacts

The Departmental responsibilities and efficiency savings, however, are still only a part of the broader governmental policy context. Educational Policy has its own overarching objectives which are seen as:

1. Raising achievement and improving skills;
2. Technology-confident providers;
3. Improved parental engagement;
4. Improved engagement in work-based skills development;
5. Narrowing gaps and supporting the vulnerable;
6. Improved engagement of disadvantaged groups;
7. Technology-supported assessment to improve retention and progression;
8. Systems to safeguard learners online;
9. Improving capacity, quality and efficiency;
10. Increased capacity in learning provision;
11. Technology-confident providers to raise quality of assessments;
12. Technology-based business systems to improve provider efficiency.

As can be seen there are clear themes emerging across these various policy dimensions, notably around raising achievement, using technology and being inclusive. (Note that a national Digital Inclusion Strategy Action Plan is to be published on October 24th 2008.)

1 HM Government (Cabinet Office) 2005 'Transformational government: enabled by technology' http://www.cio.gov.uk/documents/pdf/transgov/transgov-strategy.pdf

System-level impact of strategy

As well as these policy objectives, there are system-level targets set in order to see how effective the delivery of policy has been, and what impact it has made:

1. Improved personalised learning experiences;
2. Learners able to exercise choice among flexible learning option;
3. Tailored and responsive assessment, which addresses learners' needs;
4. Engaging learning experiences, which support deep and higher order learning;
5. Engaged and empowered learners;
6. Learner entitlement is met with all vulnerable groups supported;
7. Technology adds value to family and informal learning;
8. Learners use technology confidently and safely to support their learning;
9. Confident system leadership and innovation;
10. Technology confident, effective providers;
11. Enabled infrastructure and processes.

Curiously, for a policy system designed to measure impact, these are somewhat tricky to quantify and use for target setting, if that is what you are planning to do. Nonetheless, an Impact Study will be commissioned, which could be used as part of an iterative review process. Illustrative of this process is the three year implementation plan for the further education sector, which seeks to embed technology in all aspects of the operations of the sector to realize the benefits it can bring (Becta 2008, 8).

The case for the policy

Over recent years, Becta has been responsible for the development and implementation of the Government's e-strategy (first released in March 2005). As a policy-centred organisation, it has the responsibility for both monitoring the implementation and impact of the strategy, and identifying good practice. It also supports research to identify trends in technology and practice; feeds the results of research into the development of implementation plans for the strategy; and undertakes any updating needed to ensure consistency with the strategic objectives of Government, as these change along with developments in technology affecting education.

To carry out these tasks, Becta draws on its own research, notably the Harnessing Technology Surveys of schools and the components of the Further Education and Skills sector (FE colleges, Adult and Community Learning, Work-Based learning and Offender Learning), impact studies, technology studies and intervention studies. In addition to its own research, Becta employs research carried out or commissioned by (and sometimes with) other agencies such as the JISC, QCA and SSAT. Becta is also developing the capacity, through the 'Dashboard' facility, to continually update its analysis of the impact of the policy across the education system. This will mean that departmental policy makers and strategists at DIUS and DCSF will receive more frequent and detailed updates on

the use of technology in the education system that matches precisely the objectives of the strategy.

While such reporting may make better use of the commissioned research data, incorporating and/or responding to the wider range of findings of research coming from universities and other agencies may be more difficult, as this research is not focused on the policy imperatives we have discussed above. Responding to the wider research agenda and findings will be a key challenge in assessing the impact of *Harnessing Technology*, even if we will now know more of its impact within its own terms.

Improved personalised learning

In many ways, the Government's key concern is with Personalised Learning (Becta 2008, 21), effectively a strategy to get at every learner and ensure that they don't fall out of the system without achieving the targets for individual attainment. They state that 'a shift towards more personalised learning is fundamental to the Government's approach to education and skills', and it is here where they say that 'it is likely to entail significant development of practice with technology' (Becta 2008, 26).

Personalised Learning should be geared to the needs of individuals and provide the right level of challenge, so that we achieve a 'more differentiated learning experience where learners' needs are better understood and met' (Becta 2008, 33). So the potential for technology is seen as lying in its ability to provide differentiated and targeted learning.

A key aspect of this strategy, and what differentiates it from the original *Harnessing Technology* strategy, is that it is concerned to stimulate what is characterised as the 'demand' side of education (Becta 2008, 42). The argument is that government has worked on the supply-side, largely through the provision of Web-based resources, and through the support of agencies such as JISC and Becta, but that is now seen as a form of pump-priming that is no longer affordable.

The Learner Entitlement Framework is constructed to stimulate demand by giving learners an entitlement, arguably more likely to be used by their parents, but is included as a key demand-side tool.

This is the heart of the new strategy, and it is a clear nod towards a learner-centred approach to education. However, the term 'entitlement' is not defined, and the nature of learning outcomes and processes is not up for debate. This is a learner entitlement to do better in the current education system, and it takes little account of the lessons learnt over a decade of Technology-enhanced learning projects and lessons. Learner entitlement can thus be defined as:

- Access to online support and tuition, alongside tailored personal support;
- Entitlement to tools to support learning;
- Integrating online learning with host provision;
- Accessible online information, advice and guidance;
- Access to continuing support to acquire and update skills;
- Appropriate methods and avenues for learner consultation and engagement.

Policy as a check-list?

It is worth noting that there is very much a check-list quality to this. We think there are two reasons for this. First, this is a high-level strategy document, which is really about a conversation between ministers who sign up to be responsible for policy targets, and civil servants who have to actually deliver the policy. So this is a managerial conversation about how to characterise an e-learning strategy in policy terms that can be shown to have clear targets.

The second reason, as we will discuss below, is that there is no real conversation with educationalists, treated on equal terms with policy makers because they are professionals, about the strategy. The strategy comes out in a form that relates to the communications between Departmental officials and management consultants. In our view, each aspect of the policy, whilst being wholly admirable in terms of intentions, tends to be flawed because of the lack of input from educational professionals, especially practitioners. In fact, Becta went to great lengths to consult with key figures in the sector, but the final document is polished into a Departmental form, with summative diagrams providing the critical elements.

Take, for example, the five elements of the strategy: 'Learner entitlement', 'Engaging the family and informal learning', 'Providing professional tools for teachers', 'Mobilising technology leadership', and 'Sustainable personal technology'. We would object to none of these. However, these elements are being promoted to balance a lack of take up of e-learning in the school sector, rather than as elements of a coherent learner-centred strategy.

E-strategy analysis

At the conference we asked: 'What's missing from this analysis and the policy framework as a whole?' We provided a discussion document called the Policy Forest, used the previous day at a Learner Generated Contexts conference, developed as follows. We presumed Harnessing Technology had eleven key components. Some readers will be aware of Stephen Downes work on e-Learning 2.0[1], and whilst it isn't inevitable that all of Web 2.0 will be mainstreamed, there is plenty to account for, especially in a 'cloud'

1 Stephen Downes on e-learning 2.0 (accessed October 19 2008) http://www.downes.ca/post/31741

computing future. So we looked at this, at O'Reilly's underlying values of Web 2.0[1], and at the authors' work in the 'The Architecture of Participation', and we proposed eleven statements for a Web 2.0 Harnessing Technology strategy. Then, as members of the Learner Generated Contexts (LGC) group, we identified the appropriate eleven strategy statements from an LGC perspective.

We then asked people to select up to 11 statements that they thought would best constitute an e-learning strategy from the 33 outlined (see Appendix One). At the suggestion of people at the LGC event, we also allowed people to identify statements they strongly objected to. We used the same format at Greenwich, and got very similar results from a slightly larger sample size - 24 and 29 respectively. As both audiences were educationalists with interests in technology maybe this was to be expected; nonetheless, the outcomes were instructive.

Results of Policy Forest survey

Below is the combined result, in order, of the 11 most popular policy statements, from two surveys of a total of 53 learning technology professionals. The first three statements came top on both occasions, with the Greenwich conference respondees emphasising the role of the teacher more:

1. Learning as a mixture of formal, non-formal & informal processes;
2. Adaptive Institutions respond collaboratively to learner need;
3. Learners are producers and consumers of learning resources;
4. Multi-skilled teachers co-ordinate knowledge creation;
5. Open Architecture of Participation enables multiple learning networks;
6. Teachers as Learning Brokers;
7. Learners are collaborative producers of negotiated learning activities;
8. Provision of educational software improved by technically confident teachers;
9. Learners are technically competent to organise their own learning spaces;
10. Social software points to and provides learning resources;
11. Policy developed iteratively by Learning and Policy Professionals.

Interestingly, seven of the eleven statements are from the Learner-Generated Contexts position, three are web 2.0 and only one from Harnessing Technology ('provision of educational software improved by technically confident teachers').

1 O'Reilly T – web site http://radar.oreilly.com/tim/

Conclusion

We would conclude that whilst Harnessing Technology puts a 'learner entitlement' at the centre of policy, it is not a learner-centric policy. It is not even particularly technology-centric, and almost entirely ignores Web 2.0, which will certainly influence technology use over the next few years. In it own terms, as a policy document, it is based on assumptions about future economic requirements as defined by Leitch. As such, it minimises any value from input by education professionals/practitioners.

To the authors it is clear from our brief survey with education professionals who are confident in using technology, and knowledgeable about its affordances, that we need a strategy which exhibits the following:

a) Greater learner-centredness;
b) A trust in learners and professionals and their relationships;
c) A need to develop digital networks;
d) Policy formulation that is responsive and not didactic.

This requires policy-makers to work alongside educators as equals in the development of policy. These findings are consistent with those emerging from the work of Jephcote, Salisbury and Rees[1], that in these times of great change for staff in Further Education, the principal value for practitioners in reviewing their role is in the development and maintenance of their relationships with learners. 'Evidence suggests that they (practitioners) expend much emotional labour and employ a range of strategies, but on the whole, while not ignoring the demands of other stakeholders, they privilege the needs and interests of learners in their adoption of an ethic of care' (Jephcote, Salisbury & Rees, 2008).

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Becta's Research Publications are published on its Government and Partners page - http://partners.becta.org.uk/

You may also want to refer to the following paper, which explores these issues from an institutional perspective:
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1 Jephcote M, Salisbury J and Rees G 2008, 'Being a teacher in further education in changing times' *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13, 2, pp163-172

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Appendix One: The LGC Policy Forest

(preferred policy statements shaded)

Issue	Harnessing Technology 2.0	Web 2.0	Learner Generated Contexts 1.0
Policy Context	Ministers determine national educational policy	Policy emerges pragmatically from user behaviour	Policy developed iteratively between learning and policy professionals
System	Formalised system driven by targets, league tables, and inspection	System dynamically changing in 'Perpetual Beta'	Self-regulated Learning System reviewed by professionals, learners & key stakeholders
Institution	Education adapts to the learning institutions in the system	Learning Structures adapt to the software tools that are available.	Adaptive Institutions respond collaboratively to learner needs
Architecture	Technology Leadership (Local Authority Champions) develops Educational infrastructure	Distributed Service Architecture using the web as platform	Open Architecture of Participation enables multiple learning networks
Software	Provision of educational software improved by technically confident teachers	Social software points to and provides learning resources	Dynamic aggregation of resources meets learning design needs
Teachers	Subject specialist teachers drive education through key stages	Teachers as learning brokers	Multi-skilled teachers co-ordinate knowledge creation
Learning Process	Learner offer supported by a learner technology entitlement	Learning outcomes agreed mutually through learning contracts	Holistic project development drives Learning

Outcomes	Formal National Assessments	Reputation as validation	Collaborative learning published in multiple formats
Space	Improve building quality to 'world class'	Use online Learning Spaces	Learners technically competent to organise their own learning spaces
Learners	Learners are subjects of the education system	Learners are producers and consumers of learning resources	Learners collaborative producers of negotiated learning activities
Context	Families support formal learning informally	Learning a non-formal activity	Learning a mixture of formal, non-formal & informal processes

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Learning from the Learners' Experience was the sixth e-learning@greenwich conference to be organised by the University of Greenwich, and for the second year in succession we are pleased to publish reflections by practitioners on their presentations to conference.

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