

VLE for Dual Career Sports Officials Undertaking a Part-time MA in Personal and Professional Development

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1. Introduction

Having run previous modules for full-time sports officials and struggling to ensure attendance at face-to-face tutorials, it was clear that a new cohort with dual careers, officiating and usually full-time employment, would only accentuate this problem. The use of a VLE seemed to be a suitable solution to the problem, as it would reduce the amount of face-to-face contact required, and provide a central repository for all materials and a method for tracking student engagement with the learning materials. However, with only limited personal experience using, and no experience running, a VLE, there was an uncertainty about how to undertake the process.

In addition, this first module required students to complete an Employability Development Portfolio (EDP). This had previously been required in hard copy format which had proved difficult to physically move between remotely-based students, markers, second markers and external verifiers. Therefore, as part of the VLE, a link to the Mahara e-portfolio system was established so that learners could develop their EDP online.

2. Practice/innovation detail

With the essential help of the UOG LTS team, a VLE with access to Mahara was set up for the new cohort of learners.

It was relatively easy to populate the VLE with existing Word, PDF etc materials and to insert links to other useful resources. The Mahara EDP was populated by the LTS team, with suggested chapters for the learners to insert their EDP materials into.

3. Evaluation

The process of setting up the VLE was relatively straightforward and well supported by the LTS team. However, the VLE has not resolved all of the identified problems, as detailed below:

Face-to-face contact: it has reduced the face-to-face contact which is an essential element, owing to learner time constraints. Even with this reduction, it has proved impossible to get all eight students in one room at the same time. However, feedback indicates that the learners far prefer face-to-face sessions to VLE materials, and they feel they learn from the discussions that take place outside of the directed study. It is a Catch-22: they learn more face-to-face but can't make the time to attend face-to-face. This still needs to be effectively resolved. It has been partly resolved by the use of one-to-one Skype calls, which is time-consuming for the tutor, but a possibly more beneficial solution for both learners and tutors could be virtual classrooms at specific times.

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Central repository for materials: this has worked well and saved the tutor a lot of time in handling student queries. Over time, students have become used to the VLE, rather than an email to the tutor, being the first point of call.

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Learner engagement: the data available is useful to track who is regularly using the VLE and, as the only source of specific learning materials is the VLE, it gives an indication of who is engaging with those materials. The announcement section is useful, but as the notifications can only be sent to UoG email addresses, it has proved ineffective because part-time learners don't use their UoG accounts. The work-around of forwarding UoG email to other addresses doesn't appear to work either when set up, and most learners haven't tried this option anyway. No student has posted on the student forum.

4. Conclusions

A VLE needs to be a central part of the interface with remote learners, particularly this group. However, I don't feel it has made the impact I had hoped for initially. This is mainly owing to the materials being too dry to engage learners and the learners not feeling aligned to the VLE.

I would consider:

- in the first module, making contribution to the forum an assessed activity (10 - 20% of available marks) to force this process of engagement. This could be organised by setting weekly activities based around video clips etc;
- ensuring that notifications go to an email address that is actively used by the learners;
- creating more engaging materials, not just uploading existing Word documents;
- using virtual classrooms;
- more proactive use of Adobe Connect web conferencing for small group learning.

5. Further information

Module/Course/Department	MA in Personal & Professional Development for PGMOL
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