

E-LEARNING IN EUROPE: MOVING FORWARD

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Abstract

Based on the work of the EUNIS E-learning Task Force, this paper reports on and explores the way e-learning is developing across the European community. Information was gained from a survey of EUNIS members, and includes contributions from the E-Learning Task Force groups who investigated a range of topics. The paper outlines common issues and typical development projects underway in Europe. For example, a major theme reported by EUNIS member universities is the change from “choosing” to “using” e-learning platforms. The paper also reports on future activities and progress of the E-Learning Task Force.

Introduction

The EUNIS e-learning Task Force was re-launched in September 2006, its growing membership is over 40 people, and 20 colleagues from 9 countries attended the first meeting of the re-launched group in Birmingham in November 2006. The focus of the meeting was to present the findings of the “snapshots” survey, and to pull together emerging current themes. Task Force members had been asked to fill in the online survey before attending the meeting, and a summary of the data was presented.

The original survey was launched in 2005 and reported at EUNIS 2006 [1]. In 2006 the survey was made available to all EUNIS members via the website. Before attending the Birmingham meeting Task Force members filled in the survey. When analysed, certain themes emerged and these are described below. Although this is not a sample that represents Europe as a whole, it is a good representation of the EUNIS member universities.

As well as an analysis of the survey results, Task Force members organised themselves into five groups, each group responsible for investigating an e-Learning theme and reporting back. Constraints such as time and availability of members has hampered some of the investigations, but the groups are committed to continuing the work of the Task Force and are meeting in Grenoble in 2007 to plan the next stage and take stock of progress so far.

Current themes in e-learning

1. From “choosing” to “using”

The most significant theme that emerged was the change from “choosing” to “using” platforms. In the past there was much debate about which was the best software to choose for the university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), now most universities have made a decision about which platform to use and concerns have moved on to making the best use of the system. This is changing the emphasis away from decisions about which system to use towards which approach to use for teaching and learning.

2. Blended learning

Earlier use of e-learning systems seemed to imply a totally online delivery, but our evidence suggests that it is now becoming standard practice to mix online activities with face to face teaching in a blended delivery approach. This approach can be more responsive to the needs of the student and allows the tutor to match the right e-learning tools to the specific task in hand.

3. Pedagogies

A further theme in current practice is to give more attention to the development of good learning design and teaching practice. This follows on naturally from the first two themes, more people are thinking about usage of system and choosing the most suitable software tools to use for a particular activity.

4. Collaborative approaches

Many of our respondents were trying to promote collaborative approaches where students, lecturers and learning technologists all need to be involved. It will be interesting to see in future if current trends in online systems such as collaborative content creation, group writing and shared bookmarking have an impact on the way e-learning is used within universities.

Respondents also mentioned the importance of a “reward system” for staff who are e-learning innovators, along the lines of those rewards given to staff in recognition for excellence in research output.

5. Platforms

Here is a list of the platforms reported as being in use, the most commonly used ones first were:

- WebCT
- Moodle
- Blackboard
- WWW – web pages
- ATutor
- IBM workplace
- DOKEOS
- First Class
- BSCW
- ILIAS
- Lotus Domino

The big difference between this year and last year is that Moodle has appeared, and indeed it has gone straight to second place. It would be interesting to see if next year Moodle moves into first position. Moodle has a strong community of users and this inspires a sense of ownership.

Development Projects Being Undertaken

1. Social software

Task Force members identified a number of projects they were involved in that might lay foundations for future developments. The most common area for investigation is that of student centred systems, such as social networking software. In addition some respondents highlighted developments in the area of e-portfolios, personal development planning (PDPs) and personal web space for students. This illustrated how there is a growing trend to either shift away from or supplement the use of traditional large e-learning course-based content by making use of material produced by students and shared amongst themselves and their tutors.

2. Roll Out

Moving on from small scale use with early adopters more universities are reporting projects that roll out e-learning across the entire university population and course provision

3. Digital Libraries and E-repositories

We have no clear evidence of the extent of adoption of these formal institutional systems for sharing e-resources, but certainly many such systems are being constructed, and there is interest in exploring their potential.

4. Technology Enriched Learning Spaces

There are moves in the UK to develop more imaginative areas for learning and teaching. However, we are not sure that this is a common concern across Europe.

Task Force Activities

Working groups were set up within the Task Force to carry out a number of activities:

- The EUNIS Snapshots Survey will become an ongoing service. Sections of the survey have been rewritten by the “Snapshot Group”. A revised questionnaire is now on the EUNIS website and regular reported and analysis of the data will disseminated to EUNIS members.
- A second group undertook to gather case studies of good practice across Europe. These will be called E-Learning Highlights. Again, full details will be make available to EUNIS members, though summaries and overviews will be more generally published.
- An award in the memory of Jens Dorup will be announced at EUNIS 2007. The Task Force working group will make the arrangements for receiving entries and judging the award. The award will be given to an individual who has demonstrated innovation in e-Learning.

- The fourth group has investigated EU funding opportunities in particular the current Lifelong Learning Network Programme. This group will help to advise and encourage partnerships.
- Finally, a “Futures Group” has undertaken to look at strategies, communities of practice to see what new applications of e-learning are being promoted and taken forward. The group will also organise events for evaluation of future directions in e-learning throughout Europe.

The Task Force meeting in Grenoble at EUNIS 2007 will provide the opportunity to build on these first steps, to include more members in the group activities and to create new topics if there is interest. The Task Force does not have its own agenda. It exists within EUNIS to provide opportunities for those who wish to work together, and who have ideas they want to take further.

Conclusion

The feedback from EUNIS Task Force members has shown a move forward in the evolution of e-learning in universities across Europe. Universities have made decisions on their software platforms and are now making progress in rolling out VLE usage across more and more courses, towards total coverage. The principal approach is that of “blended learning” - using e-learning techniques alongside face to face teaching for particular activities in the course. The consequence of having this kind of usage is that more thinking is needed about what is the most useful pedagogic approach for each learning and teaching activity.

Regarding platforms, we notice that Moodle adoption has risen very quickly over the last year. It is not clear whether this is because Moodle is being adopted by universities who have only recently chosen a VLE, or if it is because institutions are changing over. This is a trend to watch in next year’s survey.

A significant emerging trend is the interest in developing the use of systems which are in many cases supplementary to the principal institutional VLE. Student-centred systems such as those for social networking, Web2.0 applications, and e-portfolios are being considered. Though some VLE systems can incorporate such tools, there are many systems available external to the VLE and it is not essential to stay within the boundaries of the principal VLE system.

The Task Force has only just started work in its present form this year and we look forward to further feedback about e-learning development in EUNIS member institutions and also seeing an extension in the scope of its activities.

References

[1] Rothery, A. Dorup, J. Cordewener, B. EUNIS E-Learning Snapshots, EUNIS 2006, Tartu (2006)