

[P13] Training the teachers: virtual learning – real benefits?

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Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are now in widespread use in British Universities (Ward, Gordon *et al.* 2001; Browne and Jenkins 2003). The University of Leicester first deployed the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment in May 2002. The School of Biological Sciences was an early adopter of the VLE and was the first to deploy an undergraduate module using online assessment. VLE usage is voluntary and at the discretion of the module convenor or Degree Teaching Team. In order to facilitate development of the VLE across the School of Biological Sciences, we conducted an audit of all module convenors by means of face-to-face interviews to complete a standardized questionnaire.

Two questionnaires were devised, Questionnaire 1 for those classed as Blackboard users and Questionnaire 2 for those classed as Blackboard non-users. The convenors were classed as established 'Blackboard users' if they had created a Blackboard site for a module that they convened by uploading teaching material to the system. Convenors were classed as 'Blackboard non-users' if they had either only used Blackboard to view material that was already online, or had never accessed the system at all. There were five common questions, referring to background information that was independent of Blackboard usage.

The response rate was 84%. Face to face interviews were conducted with 41 staff, covering 66 modules. Sixty two percent of

convenors surveyed used Blackboard. All of these users employed the software to make teaching documents available to students, and 85% used the inbuilt Announcements and Staff Information areas. In contrast, only 19% of users attempted any sort of online assessment, and even fewer used the more sophisticated communications tools provided (Discussion Boards, 8%; Virtual Classroom, 0%). In general, the majority of staff were using Blackboard as an alternative (or as a supplement) to providing printed handout material at the lecture. Only three modules used Blackboard tests for summative assessment. General comments about why staff used Blackboard were collated. The most commonly cited reason was that it led to student pull for information and provided an easy method to distribute lecture handouts. Peer pressure from colleagues was the next most cited reason for starting to use Blackboard.

Over a third of staff admitted that lack of time was the biggest barrier to expanding their use of the system, and a fifth stated that they felt they did not have the knowledge required to go further. Interestingly, these were the same reasons given by non-users of Blackboard to explain why they did not use the system.

However, in spite of a comprehensive program of staff development and training in the use of the VLE, only 10% of staff in the School of Biological Sciences had received any centralised formal training in Blackboard, with the rest being entirely self-taught. There was

widespread lack of knowledge of the SENDA legislation and how it applied to teaching material on Blackboard.

Overall, there is relatively widespread adoption of the VLE throughout the School, and this is growing (shown by an increase in the proportion of modules now on Blackboard from 56 to 65% over the last semester).

The findings of this audit indicate that while many staff have used Blackboard to some extent, a large majority fail to make use of the potential pedagogical advantages offered by the full functionality of the software. A small percentage of staff had attended formal centralized staff development sessions, the majority of those classed as Blackboard users being self-taught. These results indicate that when academic staff begin to use a VLE in a self-taught environment, they do not consider how it can be used to improve the educational value of their teaching. Instead, it is seen as a quick way to deliver learning materials that would otherwise have been delivered by alternative means, e.g. printed handouts. In particular, time constraints and the naïve expectations that learning technology is either a bottomless pit or a quick technological fix for pedagogical problems result in the use of sophisticated C&IT systems as mere filing systems – the lowest educational denominator.

Models for the establishment of VLEs and e-learning in university education suggest that it is a process which occurs in stages (Jevons and Northcott 1994) along a continuum. If this is so, our survey shows that there is little training required to reach the first stage of enhancement– transfer of existing teaching materials to a VLE. However, it is not clear how progression towards substitution should be encouraged or supported. How staff development handles this progression will be key to the development of e-learning in our Universities (Orsmond and Stiles 2002). It is acknowledged that the experience of being a student in an online course increases the

awareness of online tutors to the needs of their students (Salmon 2002). One example of an online course about computer aided assessment demonstrated that this approach is popular with academics and encouraged a sound approach to online assessment (Walker, Adamson et al. 2004). Models for situated learning (learning embedded in the social and physical context within which it is used) have been shown to be popular and effective modes for change within universities (Taylor 2003). Emphasis on the provision of exemplars of effective online teaching, faculty-based and discipline-based support, and a range of diverse options for staff learning (O'Reilly, Ellis et al. 2000) will lead us forward from 'simply putting notes on the web' to providing an enhanced learning experience for our students, and to appreciate the difference between the simple, document repository-push response to VLEs which results in 'e-Teaching', and the interactive, reflective, student-pull of well thought out e-Learning.

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