

# In touch, online

Supporting placement learning through  
a Virtual Learning Environment



University of  
Newcastle upon Tyne

# In touch, online

There are already many useful resources acting as 'guides to placement learning'. This document focuses on one possible aspect of that process: the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to support students on placement. It aims to provide a starting point in the development of online resources rather than to set out the case in favour of such development although the experience at The University of Newcastle upon Tyne has been that students have used, and enjoyed using, the VLE during their placement.

Many Higher Education institutions now have a VLE to support their teaching and learning activities, whether an off-the-shelf package or a solution that has been developed in-house.

## At Newcastle University

- ➔ one VLE (Blackboard) has been adopted for the whole institution
- ➔ approximately 1,800 active modules are registered on the Blackboard server
- ➔ almost all students use Blackboard on at least some modules
- ➔ students undertaking placements typically do so after two years of study

Under HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 4, Newcastle University ran a pilot project with students undertaking the Food & Human Nutrition and Applied Biology undergraduate degree programmes. These students undertake a year-long placement after completing Stage Two before returning to campus for the final year of their programme.

What is outlined here is based partly on what we did in developing materials for the pilot cohort and partly on what we would have done if only we'd known! Feedback from students has been an important factor in helping us to refine our ideas and the offering for subsequent cohorts.

Three basic questions helped to inform the development of online placement support for the Newcastle students:

### Who's the audience?

### What's the purpose?

### What resources are available?

Within these main headings, we used a series of questions to kick start the process.

## Who's the audience?

Different audiences have different characteristics and these will clearly influence the content and the structure of what is on offer.

### At Newcastle the key audience

- ➔ was made up of undergraduate students on honours science programmes
- ➔ had already completed two years of study
- ➔ were away from campus for their placement
- ➔ undertook placements in diverse organisation types (health authorities and research laboratories through to food manufacturing and food retail environments)
- ➔ were geographically dispersed during their placements
- ➔ submitted a portfolio of evidence for a City & Guilds Licentiate award

Initial developments have led to the materials being adapted for use with students where some of these conditions apply. Modern Languages have the biggest cohort of students off-campus at any one time and are exploring the use of Blackboard 'communities' to support them. Applied Communications students undertake a consultancy project for an employer and remain on campus but fulfil some of the same learning outcomes. At another institution, the materials are helping to inform decisions about placement support for nursing students.

### KICK START QUESTIONS:

- |                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Who are the students?        | What do they already know? |
| How big is the cohort?       | What do they need to know? |
| Do they all know each other? | Where will they be?        |

## What's the purpose?

At Newcastle, the primary purpose was to support a formal programme of learning outcomes. The materials and the broader environment of the VLE needed to provide information and support to allow them to compile appropriate evidence that they had fulfilled the necessary outcomes. Although these students submit for an award from City & Guilds, the same principle would apply to supporting the achievement of any structured set of learning outcomes.

One of the reasons that we chose to create a Blackboard module rather than creating a community was that we were keen to establish a clear link between the placement learning experience and the campus learning experience. Maintaining a consistent vocabulary seemed to contribute to this aim.

Other purposes were identified as:

- maintaining continuity for the cohort
- providing a channel for social contact
- streamlining contact for common questions
- providing an easy route for submitting reports
- providing electronic storage for students' documents

## KICK START QUESTIONS:

What must the materials provide?

Is there an established framework (for accreditation, academic credit etc)?

What would add value?

What do the students need to produce?

What evidence will the students need to collect?

## What resources are available?

At Newcastle, we were already working within a decision to have an online support package.

Having an online resource has some clear advantages

- easy to update as information changes
- a single point of contact, student-to-student and student-to-tutor
- a forum for announcements so that all students can access the same information at the same time
- common questions can be asked and answered for all to see

Many people are relatively comfortable with creating and editing web pages and depending on your audience, your purpose and your technical know-how, this may be a good route. In order to provide elements such as interactive content, discussion boards, electronic storage for documents and a submission route for reports, however, it may be best to use a package that offers tools to develop such elements as part of an integrated whole. Hardware, software, time, expertise, availability of appropriate training where necessary, familiarity - all of these factors should influence decisions about how to support students' learning on placement.

Blackboard was the obvious choice for developments at Newcastle. With secure access via a simple web interface students and their host organisations did not need specialist software in order to access materials. All staff and students have ready access to Blackboard; staff can attend in-house training to help them get started and students become accustomed to seeing materials on Blackboard to support their learning during their programme. Having spent two years on campus, the Newcastle students were familiar with the VLE and it was strongly associated with their university learning.

## KICK START QUESTIONS:

What are the students familiar with using?

Will I need specialist or technical knowledge in order to develop materials?

Are there tools to help me develop interactive elements if necessary?

How easy is it to update materials?

What support is available to me (technical support, training etc)?

Is anybody doing something similar so that we could share materials or structures?



## What next?

Answering the kick start questions should help you to build up a detailed response to the three overarching questions, putting you in a good position to make decisions about the two fundamentals of any support materials, whether online or not:

- **Content**
- **Structure**

A good starting point can be to become a 'student' on one or two existing modules. Explore the structures; see how things vary from the defaults you may see as you start to develop your own materials; check whether the structure leads the student through the content. You could ask for guest access on modules elsewhere if your own institution is new to e-learning; there are even a few web-based examples available over the internet.

### Content

Most of this is likely to stem from the answers to the questions under the 'What's the purpose?' theme. The style in which it is presented will come mostly from being clear about the audience.

**At Newcastle, the core content boiled down into**

- ➔ **a statement of the expected learning outcomes**
- ➔ **a section for each learning outcome which provided:**
  - a statement and explanation of the outcome
  - interactive elements (tests, quizzes etc) to allow students to explore and develop understanding of the outcome
  - information on collecting suitable evidence to demonstrate achievement of the outcome for the final portfolio

Some content was also added to support the more social aims of the materials. For example, the calendar contained not only the dates for handing in reports but also displayed greetings in the week of a student's birthday.

Announcements and discussion boards also build up content over time and can be used to reflect changing circumstances, reinforce points made in the 'core' content, cover new material if it becomes necessary, direct attention to key areas at appropriate times and so on.

Existing content can often be adapted. If your students have typically been issued with a placement handbook there's every chance that much of the material can be used online, too. Take advantage of interactive elements to do additional things that you could not have done on paper.

### Structure

VLEs already have structure, a framework into which your materials can fit. Use whatever is useful to you but don't let it constrain you. Decide how you want to put things together and then work out how to make the existing structure work for you. Our VLE, Blackboard, has a default menu structure but items can be changed.

**For example**

- ➔ **if you plan to make extensive use of discussion boards, show their importance by linking directly from the first menu level, rather than relying on students to find the sub-link under 'Communications'**
- ➔ **if some options won't be used - we didn't have a reading list so the default 'Books' menu item was redundant- remove them to reduce potential for confusion**
- ➔ **use areas as signposts if students could be looking for materials in the 'wrong' places - just tell them where it is or provide a link to it if your VLE allows for easy internal linking**
- ➔ **treat defaults as useful starting points rather than fixed structures wherever you can**

Whatever structure you develop, a VLE will generally have built-in mechanisms for tracking and displaying that structure but, if you decide to opt for web pages developed outside a VLE, it's useful to provide as many clues as possible so that students can keep track of where they are. Decisions that seem clear and unambiguous to you as you develop materials may result in structures that fit your mental map but not that of others. 'Breadcrumbs' are popular and widely recognised (they usually take the format *Section name* → *Sub-section name* → *Page name*, often with the section and sub-section names as links back to the 'parent' pages). You can also provide alphabetical indexes, 'maps' organised by section and so on.

Early on in the process it's worth talking to your institution's disability expert or finding a fact sheet from your computing or technical support function - they should be able to help you to avoid doing things in terms of structure and presentation that will make your materials less accessible for a student with a disability. For example, avoid using colour to convey extra information (e.g. "Items in red correspond to a City and Guilds outcome"), choose a symbol instead (e.g. "Items marked with an asterisk correspond to a City and Guilds outcome"). If separate sections will open in new windows, say explicitly that this will happen ("This unit will open in a new window"). Small things such as this can be fiddly to change after materials have been developed but can make a big difference to students with visual impairments - it makes sense to build in accessibility from the start.



## Keeping it all going

Part of the rationale for setting up online support for placement learning is that students get continued contact with each other and with their institution while they are away. Encouraging them to use the VLE regularly is therefore important.

### Newcastle's experience suggests several factors:

#### Setting expectations

Students attend a placement briefing just before finishing Stage Two of their programme. We used this opportunity to set some expectations and commitments. Ours were that the tutor would log in to the Blackboard module at least once a week and that we expected the students to do the same. In a few cases, internet access was restricted at work but once the purpose and expectation were explained, students were allowed to access the materials.

#### Using announcements

Even if there's nothing really announcement-worthy, announce something! It proves to students that you are fulfilling your commitment to log in and that you are interested in them and what they are doing. We now realise that we didn't do enough of this in the first year and that students say they wanted more.

It's easy for a tutor to see whether students are logging in and using Blackboard - the VLE keeps track and produces detailed statistical breakdowns. Students won't usually know that their tutor is active unless you provide something they can see.

#### Discussion boards

Like announcements, join in, start discussions, ask questions to encourage participation. We provided three separate boards: one for work issues to ask questions and share experiences of tackling common issues; one for issues to do with preparing evidence for the portfolio; and one for socialising. The Placement Tutor and Project Manager took part in the first two but the social board was a staff-free zone.

Discussion boards provide one of the best means for streamlining communication. In the past, students e-mailed or telephoned to ask questions. The Placement Tutor answered the questions individually and often answered the same question several times. Asking and answering on the Discussion Boards has helped to cut down on duplicate efforts.

The board dedicated to socialising was the most popular of the three boards, demonstrating that the students did appreciate the opportunity to stay in touch on an informal basis.

As the provision of the board carries with it an obligation to ensure student welfare, we asked a postgraduate student

(a recent graduate of the Food & Human Nutrition course and well known to the students as a demonstrator) to take part in the group on the understanding that if ever anything suggested that a student was having significant problems, she would alert the placement tutor.

#### Calendar

As mentioned above, the calendar was used both formally and informally. Deadlines for submission of reports appeared as calendar events but so did student birthdays. This more social function proved popular - when a technical hitch in moving materials to a newer version of the VLE meant that the birthdays 'disappeared' for a while, students wanted to know where they had gone!

#### Interactivity

The survey towards the end of the placement period revealed that students did enjoy the interactive elements of the materials. The tests and quizzes were not assessed in any way; they were designed to help students explore concepts and check their understanding of the learning outcomes.

#### Student Home Pages

Sadly, a security loophole in the VLE led to the Student Home Page facility being disabled at the time our pilot cohort went out on placement. This has been addressed and subsequent cohorts are being asked to put up their own home page within the module. Each student can develop a page including text, pictures and links without needing any knowledge of web authoring. They can use it as a showcase for their placement and their host organisation and each student can see the homepages that have been created by the others.

#### Digital Drop Box

Students were encouraged to submit reports using the Digital Drop Box facility. This saves printing and posting and provides electronic storage space so that students can refer to documents once they return from their placements. Most students used the facility even though it was the one aspect of Blackboard that was new to them when they left campus to start their placements.

## Bringing it all together

- use the kick start questions in this guide to help you to build a clear picture of your own context and requirements
- adapt existing materials and use examples from others' developments to get off the ground quickly
- don't be afraid to change materials as you go along. If you make substantial changes after the module is active, make sure the students will not be confused by explaining what has moved, disappeared or been added
- encourage students to comment on the materials as the placement period progresses - it is possible to have completely anonymous surveys conducted within Blackboard
- demonstrate your continued involvement by making yourself visible online

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