E-learning Framework

School Results, Level 1

Academic Year 2007-8

Introduction

Renewed University recognition of the importance of e-learning is very welcome as it allows the recognition of existing good practice and the encouragement of new initiatives. The University of Teesside’s aim to make a ‘step change’ in the provision and quality of e-learning across the University can only be able to be adjudged successful (or not) if there is an awareness of the baseline from which Schools are working. New access to internal statistical data from the Blackboard servers allows us a snapshot overview of where the University currently lies.

Context

The University’s recent Pathfinder (2007/8) project has drawn up, amongst other institutional and staff resources, an e-learning model; a framework within which one can site a module in relation to its e-learning (Appendix 1). This framework is very specifically structured to allow flexibility in the definition of tools or features used in order to give maximum freedom in interpretation within a module.

The e-learning model divides this framework into four strands: *presentation* (surveys consistently tell us that the layout and look of a module can make a significant impact on the students’ view of and engagement with a Blackboard site); *organisation* (with team teaching, guest lectures and a vast range of potential materials, the way resources are actually uploaded and organised helps students see a shift from ‘document dump’ to a learning resource); *communication* (fundamentally, learning and teaching is about communication – the VLE offers many opportunities for staff-student and student-student communication and these should be an integral part of the e-learning experience of our students, not least because of the demographics of our student body and the potential for asynchronous communication); finally *construction* (there is a general acceptance of the need to build knowledge by doing, thus we encourage the provision of opportunities for students individually, in groups or corporately to create content or meta-narratives around the learning material that they engage with).

Within these strands – presentation, organisation, communication, construction – there are four gradations across the spectrum of usage. Queries have been performed on Blackboard statistical data in order to gain an overview e-learning mapped against the first level of the framework, through four simple queries. It is hoped that this will provide an illustrative baseline which will inform School-based decisions on how far to stride out in the coming academic session.

Caveats

Results presented here offer a bird’s eye view of provision (whereas internal documentation provided summary data plus full appendices with data breakdown by School). They complement any detailed audit carried out on modules by entering and examining them closely; however they are necessarily general and require some interpretation. More detail exists in the data than has been drawn out here, allowing the E-learning Team to explore modules and practice at each end of the result sets, thus identifying practice to be shared which may currently be going unnoticed and also potential for focussed development. This survey is aimed, rather than at highlighting the (not insubstantial) good practice, but instead at providing an honest appraisal of the baseline from which the desired ‘step change’ is able to be measured.

Confidentiality

The release of this document is to support collaboration between colleagues. The University of Teesside respectfully requests that any potential sensitivity arising from the nature of this report is responded to appropriately. Data results have been generalised.

Presentation

Query: how many modules have changed their menu style from the provided default?

Rationale

The web is ubiquitous, and we are competing against many other media for our students' attention. Consumers today are demanding and expect to be wooed. A strong module identity not only gives the impression that the tutors care about the site, a space to visit and interact with, to return to and engage in, rather than an unedited and unloved shell which seems obviously to be an afterthought rather than a part of the module experience. The presentation spectrum of the framework covers changing the default colour scheme, customising the default menu to one that is appropriate to the module being taught, visually identifying the module with an image banner or splash screen and creative use of themed graphics throughout the module.

Staff can create – or have created for them by the E-learning Team – visual themes and banners for their module sites, but the most simple change is to make a choice from the range of basic themes for the menu bar. Many staff might argue that their scarce and valuable time is much better applied to the learning resources than to changing button colour; however, attempting good practice in the Presentation and Organisation areas of the framework generally lead to increased student engagement with those resources, hence increasing their value. Time spent on creating learning materials at the expense of a site that does not attract and engage its students does not necessarily mean that they will visit often and find or make the most of those learning materials. It is additionally helpful for tutors when working with module sites to be able to change the colour scheme in order to identify or distinguish between modules. This may be arbitrary – a different basic colour each year which can be reflected in many different shades or designs; or it may follow print-based copy, where for example multiple occurrences of a programme have the documentation colour-coded per cohort, and this can be reflected in the themes of the accompanying VLE presences to assist teaching/support staff in switching between cohort sites.

Results

In every case, no more than 25% of modules have changed their colour scheme from the default.

Notes

1. The default settings were not chosen to be so inappropriate that staff must change it. Some staff deliberately find this colour set fitting for the module, and are happy to keep it, yet they will appear as ‘unchanged’ results.
2. Staff who have copied over content and settings from modules which have been running since prior to the default colour set will have brought forward their own or inherited settings without having made this a conscious choice to change from the default.
3. In some cases a template was applied in summer 2006 which had a changed colour set and menu and also included a banner. Therefore the results for this School appear at first glance to be very different from the others. Closer inspection reveals that not many sites have changed from that given baseline, and so these graphs are effectively in negative.

Considerations for Schools

Blackboard offers a limited flexibility in the look and feel of module sites. In order to attract and engage in today's visual world, it makes a difference to students seeing modules which look as though they identify with the module taught. Making changes to basic settings such as the default colour scheme implies that a member of staff is going to use the module, and will potentially think equally carefully about the rest of the structure and content. A 'step change' in presentation terms could be taking advantage of E@T to create banners as well as just changing the colour schemes, and thereby achieve a higher position on Presentation scale. Through sharing of good practice, hopefully staff can be won over by modules which look great in total, and be encouraged to start small. Increasing the number of visually distinct module sites would be desirable.

Organisation

Query: how many empty folders or menu areas are there in the module?

Rationale

One of the most oft-repeated feedback from students about modules is on layout and organisation. Although not often considered so important by academic staff, this represents an area where much improvement in the student experience can be made for relatively (or very) little effort on the part of tutors, mostly through common sense. There is a view that "consistency = ease of navigation" is best achieved by virtue of making all modules identical in layout. This does facilitate lecture notes being sought under a button marked "Lecture Notes" in each module, though it does not guarantee that staff upload lecture notes to "Lecture Notes". However, it reduces the vast majority of modules to a common (read: indistinguishable) look and layout. This in itself can produce confusion. It is generally better to consider "consistency = clarity of navigation", and to remember that, with the exception of a small number of purely distance learning modules, all sites in the VLE are enhancements of an existing face-to-face module. These modules have structure, coherence and the personalities of their staff, and the online versions are not a distinct version (something different), but rather an extension of them. Developing module sites in the VLE to reflect this continuity should lead to a look and feel which models the face-to-face element, and which is organised and structured similarly/appropriately. If there is a visual theme in module documentation or presentation templates, why not carry these through into the VLE? If you structure the face-to-face sessions in terms of 'Lab Sessions', 'Seminars', 'PBL cases', then why not mirror this online? The crucial element is clarity. This means that a student can recognise where they are and that it is obvious where they look for materials. Outline module information might indeed best be located in a common area in all modules, but beyond that, each module might be different. But every module should have a guide to layout, or an obvious structure, and this should be simple and kept to.

Also to be remembered is that it is perfectly ok, if not indeed preferable, for a module's online site to grow and change through the year. Students will notice the dynamic of the site and return to see what's new. Additionally, there are quite flexible ways to release content to groups or individuals by time, participation or interaction. Thus it is not necessary to see any module site with a number of empty folders or menu areas. If you would like to pre-warn students that there will be something coming here – by all means do so (though beware over-use of animated men digging roads graphics!), but evaluation shows that students prefer less buttons/links with content than a greater number of buttons/links which are apparently unpopulated. This has been consistent feedback in all VLE evaluations since 2000. As a designer, it is difficult to choose a point on the continuum of providing module shells with the full potential shown by tools/menu areas being available, ranging from almost nothing (many people will never add anything else) to everything (there will be a myriad of empty areas). Inevitably, this leads to some people never realising what new functionality can facilitate group project work, or peer assessment, or blogs for personal learning journals; whilst others upload a module guide and do not a thing else with the module. Perhaps there is no happy medium.

In the framework to model e-learning practice, the importance given to organisation is reflected in it being a factor that we ask staff to pay very careful attention to. Choosing the structure of a module in terms of how many menu areas there are, creating new buttons/links for relevant sections/resources of the module, and hiding things that do not currently support existing or planned teaching is key to ensuring that a student can quickly and easily find their way around the site and locate what they were looking for. This crucially includes telling students what they can find and where, and not confusing them with frustrating dead ends of empty folders.

Results

Across Schools, a broadly similar pattern emerged for 2007 modules. One would hope (and indeed the Threshold Quality Standard requires) that no module should display empty areas. One third of modules conform to this. However a slightly higher percentage of modules have four or more menu areas or folders visible but empty.

Notes

Many cases of empty folders are caused by a common misunderstanding arising from staff who create a folder with the express intention of using it, but then who add items below the folder rather than in it. This will count as an empty folder and needs correcting, but is an easy thing to learn and to remember. Empty folders are also found due to the helpfulness or organisation of one member of a teaching team creating a structure for the module and preparatory folders for themselves and colleagues, but this not having been communicated sufficiently so that all the folders get used by colleagues.

Consideration for Schools

Given that this is always recognised by student evaluators (rightly or wrongly) as something which characterises a good experience, does a 'step change' in practice here involve trying to bring down the number of 4+ empty areas modules or to drive on upwards from the 0 empties and hopefully establish some cases of good practice in organisational terms? Or to work with those in the middle, so that modules are either good or bad, but not still somewhere in between…?

Communication

Query: how many Announcements (available) are there in the module?

Rationale

Good practice (indeed the Threshold Quality Standard) suggests staff use electronic means to maintain regular communication with students on the progress of the module. For the majority of people this is achieved by the use of the announcements tool, effectively an electronic noticeboard, but there is scope to be creative. For example, using a module blog instead of the announcements tool allows not only richer/more flexible entries by staff but the potential for students to comment or interact; creating opportunities for conversation. The most important aspects of basic communication – especially with regard to the demographics of our student body – is that ensuring information is available in a timely manner on Bb means that it is always accessible to them. Room changes and lecture cancellations being notified electronically can result in less travelling, less money spent on childcare, less classes missed through aimless wandering looking for rooms and generally diminish student frustration. Identifying these types of communications differently from other information such as assessment info/reminders in ways that model for example using different colours of paper on noticeboards or using particular areas of a noticeboard to post ‘official’ info can help a student skimming the notices to be aware of what they are reading (especially helpful if you’re on a dial-up connection!).

The concept of communication about the progress of the module extends beyond this to being a valuable way of connecting with the students outside of the contact hours. This has proved to be a key factor in student experience. Without crossing a line of spam, being able to electronically communicate with students allows there to develop a relationship (even if the communication flow is only in one direction). Drawing attention to a relevant story in the news in between fortnightly sessions and encouraging student discussion about it can bring alive more theoretical content, and for students out on placement a weekly update on what’s happening on campus or in the professional field helps keep the students in touch with you and the department. Many of the available communication tools (blogs, wikis, podcasts, discussion boards…) allow reciprocal engagement by students, thus moving from the provision of information to the real dialogue that is learning, and which is considered in more depth in the next section on *construction*.

Notes

Some staff prefer to send out an email to students than to post announcements on Blackboard; there are also those who may add content to Blackboard but still maintain an information stream of essential communication on a physical noticeboard. Student feedback suggests that a combination of tactics (‘cover all bases’ or ‘belt and braces’) is most likely to have everybody get the message; we think that the minimum requirement to provide electronic communication on the module as it progresses should be standard practice. The new version of Blackboard (v.8.0) offers the option to also send the text of announcement as an email to the students when the announcement is created.

The query took a snapshot of visible announcements only. This means that if staff have an efficient system of time-releasing content, there may well be announcements, which, at the end of their relevance, were hidden or deleted. If such a module were ‘in between’ announcements, they would ‘fail’ this query, or at least they would not appear to shine if they had only one ‘remaining’ announcement visible. Large numbers of staff post announcements as permanent, either from out-dated education (didn’t know that you could use time release) or as a hierarchy issue (posting as permanent raises the announcement above those not so, favoured by staff team teaching on large modules and wanting their announcement to be highest visibility…). Thus results on some modules may be skewed by numbers of announcements being visible but not necessarily at all relevant. Finally, if one were to have been creative, and be using the blog tool instead of the inbuilt announcement tool, or to have opened your module with a content area into which have been posted communications, then anything of this sort will not be reflected in the results.

Results

Notwithstanding the points just discussed (module leaders may effectively use time release/tidying up of announcements), at the time polled, almost two thirds of modules had no available announcement. This is far from ideal because the impression given by a combination of no announcements and no banner image is likely to make a student consider that the module is not being used or updated by staff, and therefore may not explore far enough to discover potentially great materials that you have posted elsewhere.

Occasionally there are modules which appear to have more than 10 announcements visible. This shows that at least one announcement per fortnight has been posted – is one announcement per fortnight a minimum to be considered “regular updating on progress of the module”? Clearly close analysis of the kind of announcements being posted would reveal much more in-depth data about module communication, and a focused report based on a small sample of modules will take place in the 2008/9 session.

Considerations for Schools

What constitutes good/bad or appropriate level of communication(s) varies dependent on Level, on topic, on School, on face2face contact, on staff, on the type of module etc. Internal discussion might prompt a School/group/programme or module team agreement on what constitutes appropriate/frequent progress updates. This could usefully be done as an [ice breaker] exercise with students at the start of a module which can then form part of an agreed netiquette and statement of practice that they all agree with. This obviously would offer a chance to allay fears or inform students about general use of the VLE, and clarify expectations on both sides (staff *and* students) which should minimise confusion or frustration later on. Items agreed could include things like how often/frequent is adequate? Is the VLE to be the only/primary form of information and communication? Are announcements used in conjunction with emails, or should students be required to log in and read announcements? These discussions feed naturally into a shared agreement over associated aspects of communication such as: how often staff will check discussion boards, how quickly they will respond to email, what return time students can expect on assignment feedback (and how/where this will happen) etc in order for everyone’s expectations and/or anxieties to be addressed. We know that both retention and satisfaction of students is fundamentally predicated on the establishment and management of expectations, so this can be seen as a much more important point than simply ‘how many announcements do you post’? There is additional scope in considering elements of best practice such as colours/fonts being different for different topics or postings by different staff, for whether there is a font/colour/style distinction between important announcements (deadlines; room changes; class cancellations) or chatty communication (building cohort relationships and reflecting on the progress/direction of the module more generally).

Construction

Query: How many opportunities are there for students to construct content/knowledge in the module?

Rationale

Wide consensus exists around the concept of learning by doing. Blackboard even in its early form did include both discussion board and live chat features, as well as the possibility for students to create ‘homepages’, but their use may have been exceeded by staff emphasis on using the VLE as a delivery mechanism for content. In many ways, this is little different to the general use of a face-to-face session as a uni-directional transmission of information (lecture), rather than using that contact time as group discussion or to actively engage students in the session. With increased web 2.0-type functionality, there is even less excuse today to exclude opportunities for students to play a part in the negotiation and construction of their learning. This then is the final area of the framework; a spectrum of providing creative ways to include the students in the development of the module, and to promote and facilitate their collaboration even outside of the timetabled contact hours. So to query for construction at first level, then, simply asks how many opportunities there are for students to contribute at any point in the module, be that in a discussion forum, wiki, individual, group or project blog entry.

Notes

The query does not compute how many emails or internal messages may have been sent through the module, nor does it query as to whether the email options are in fact available to students. Otherwise, it looked at overall provision, not whether the provided option was being used – for example, whether there are *any* discussion forums present, but not if there were active threads or messages within them.

Results

Although we might have expected these results, due to the supremacy of established practice over the more recent provision of enhanced collaboration tools, the results are relatively disappointing across most of the University. In five of six Schools, over three-quarters of modules had *no* opportunity at all for students to contribute to any part of the module. This illustrates both student feedback in annual surveys suggesting the VLE is most often used as a document dump and also the common staff perception of the VLE as a resource bank rather than an area in which the students can actively engage.

Considerations for Schools

It is a commonly-held (and often ultimately disappointing) assumption that simply the creation of a discussion board will make students use it. It will not. Just adding a discussion forum – perhaps as part of a School module template – will not lead to productive engagement in discussion, although it would ‘improve’ the results in this query. There are many uses for a discussion board and moderating discussions effectively is an acquired and often trained skill. Similarly, creating a wiki and simply assuming that because Wikipedia is huge, students will know how to and have any desire to create content, if there isn’t a structured and appropriate reason and guidance to use it will not necessarily be the case either. Also, a new idea tried in one module one year often works really well, but falls off the boil when replicated in lots of modules simultaneously the following year – careful planning of entertaining innovations keeps them fresh, but most appropriate use of the functionality available as a constituent part of the learning and teaching ensures the holistic inclusion of these tools in a module. Whilst the E-learning Team are quick to point out that there is no need to use technology for the sake of technology, the provision of a variety of spaces for students to collaborate and create actively in their learning is almost certainly going to result in better engagement. Therefore as a major step toward moving forward in the e-learning support of modules, Schools should seriously consider whether there are ways of scaffolding sites to incorporate more constructivist and connectivist activities for students.

Conclusions

The intention behind drawing up a framework for e-learning was not to produce a checklist: this only encourages people either to feel that they have failed or to add all the tools available to them in order to tick boxes; it is far from necessary to include all tools on all modules at all levels at all times. Instead of a prescribed list of tools, the framework therefore allows for much greater flexibility appropriate to the module in order to achieve certain things we feel are core – for example, that students have the opportunity to give feedback on a module, but whether this happens via a discussion board, an anonymous survey or comments on a class blog is up to the staff involved. In this way, we hope to be able to support staff to use different methods to build up modules that they feel a real ownership of and connection with, rather than imposing a fixed structure on all sites which removes any of the individuality of the module itself.

The goal of the framework is also to break down the main strands into components that staff can examine and say, I’d like to do more of this, and then explore the appropriate technologies to do so. It also provides the opportunity to make informed decisions about development, in small chunks which are easily achievable. The framework was also given in order that it would help programme teams or Schools consider areas for joint effort, e.g. to request School-based training on topics such as moderating discussions for distance learning. There was asked to be a ‘step change’ in our use of e-learning across the University; the framework should help individuals and Schools consider which ‘step’ they would like to take first.

Although the framework was not designed as an audit tool, the results from the queries taken against the first levels show that in many areas there is development work to be done. What these queries and the results presented here do not show are the examples of good practice that exist in all Schools. The next task for the E-learning Team and School E-learning Co-ordinators is to ensure these examples are gathered up and disseminated to help inspire, enthuse and support colleagues.

Appendix 1: The E-learning Framework

This framework is based on a combination of elements from several e-learning and pedagogical models and is intended to be both pedagogically sound and to take into account the organisation and presentation of the module or subject as the stages of blended learning progress. It aims to be flexible in its application whilst taking into account both pedagogical and practical considerations. The four strands to consider are Presentation, Organisation, Communication and Construction. A description of each is below followed by a matrix which can be used to assess the level for each strand that you feel matches your module.

Presentation

Presentation is important in creating an interesting online module presence. A higher quality of online module site would be expected to have a clear and attractive layout which has been designed specifically with both the module and the respective students in mind.

Organisation

One of the aspects of online modules which students comment on most as a problem is sites which are badly organised. A well constructed site should be very easy for a student to navigate and should have clearly labelled files and folders so that a student can find what they are looking for as quickly as possible.

Communication

In planning how one will use communication in your module, it is important to consider both communication in terms of how to communicate with the students, and how it might be helpful to enable students to communicate with each other. Communication about the module that comes from staff to the students will obviously be important to the students and will therefore have to be easy to find for the student. There should be clear rules of conduct provided for any online student discussions and these should be moderated by staff.

Construction

Construction is one element of this model in which it may be appropriate to consider the level of module that is being taught as it refers to learning activities where the students construct new materials or ideas online. In a higher level of module students would obviously be expected to demonstrate a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the subject matter meaning that such activities may well be most appropriate for higher level modules.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level | Presentation | Organisation | Communication | Construction |
| 1 | Minimum VLE template – no customisation. | Documents placed online with no or little organisation. Online materials are standard documents rather than created specifically for the module. | No or little online communication. Announcements/ notices only. | No or little opportunity for students to construct their own resources. Material is written by teaching staff. |
| 2 | Customised items | Some use of folders to organise documents. Descriptions added to file attachments. Some materials are created specifically for the module. | Regular appropriate announcements with module links. Opportunities for basic peer-to-peer online communication. | Learning materials are not constructed or added to by students. Construction does occur through online student discussion of subject. |
| 3 | Banner image, some images in module. | Consistent thematic folder use, appropriate range of materials, some interactive activities, potential for electronic submission. Most materials are created specifically for the module. | Increased use of online communication. Use of blogs for regular notices, peer-to-peer online communication. Opportunity to offer online feedback. | More construction of ideas by students through activities online such as those related to group work or any online activity that enables students to test or apply the subject. |
| 4 | Thematic graphics in module, edited menu, student-focused design. | Alternative formats or styles with a broad range of digital interactive media. Specially designed and integrated learning activities. | Online communication is likely to play an important role in the module. Use of a ‘what’s new’ strategy. Integrated peer-to-peer online communication, integrated online feedback throughout the module. | It is an integral part of this level that students use online features to create and contribute to items as they are then using their learning experience to construct new ideas. |