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The Value and Experience of eLearning

This paper focuses on the use of eLearning within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at the University of Portsmouth. In general the term VLE is used to describe an all-encompassing system where students who log on can have access to files (Word, PPT or PDF), audio and video recordings, pictures, weblinks, mail to groups and to discussion boards, quizzes and tests, assignment hand-in and some other features such as voice emails and podcasts. The University of Portsmouth, like the majority of UK universities and colleges, uses the Blackboard Vista system (given the local name ‘Victory’ within the university, named after the famous historic ship which can be visited in Portsmouth Harbour) as its virtual learning environment, both for on-campus students and distance learners. There is plenty of online discussion in the academic community about the virtues and disadvantages of Blackboard, often in comparison with the free software called Moodle which is popular in secondary education. (See an example of this discussion at http://www.elearninglearning.com/blackboard/vle/.) The use of different types of eLearning in UK universities is rapidly expanding; there is also an increasing amount of research into the effectiveness of learning online. In the UK the principle of using large computer systems to communicate with students and provide access to materials for them was already well established for over a decade. Previous use of electronic communication at the university was through emails, library website and online journals academic staff’s own websites and a common drive on the network where documents could be placed for students to access them.

The University of Portsmouth, like other UK HEIs, has received government funding to promote and increase the use of eLearning in its courses, so it is clear that eLearning is considered in a positive light. From this arises the following question:

Why use eLearning?

‘Why use eLearning?’ is a question often posed by academics who see nothing wrong with the traditional teaching methods already established. This question is addressed by information from the Joint Information Systems Committee which has a wealth of research into the pedagogy of eLearning and guidelines on best practice (JISC - http://www.jisc.ac.uk/). The reasons for using eLearning are the ‘pervasiveness of technology’ (JISC 2009 - http://www.jisc.ac.uk/practice) and a belief in the effectiveness of eLearning - “Effective Practice in a Digital Age” (JISC 2009). Quite simply, the world our students have grown up in is not the same as the world of our own youth. Online two-way communication is absolutely normal for the students for their leisure activities, where they spend time ‘being with’ their friends through social networks such as Facebook and Myspace or Instant Messaging Systems such as MSN. Our responsibility in Higher Education is to
enable students to use virtual communication for educational purposes as well, just as they will in later life use this for their working lives. To quote from the author of “Alice in Wonderland”

‘It’s no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then.’ (Lewis Carroll)

Many other studies refer to the benefits of using eLearning. One example is from Lina Lee at the University of New Hampshire (2004) who used a VLE for networked Collaborative interaction (NCI) on a Spanish course; she had some considerations of the best conditions for success. The benefits of eLearning have to be balanced against careful planning for the needs of a particular student group, as can be seen here:

In spite of the positive conditions and benefits created by networked collaborative interaction (NCI), ... learners’ language proficiency, computer skills, and age differences are important factors to be considered when incorporating institutional NCI as these may linguistically and socially affect the quality of online negotiation and students’ motivation toward NCI.

http://llt.msu.edu/vol8num1/pdf/lee.pdf

So whilst we continue to advocate the increased use of eLearning, we are aware of the need to not adopt it blindly, rather to use it in the same way as we use any other teaching methodology by planning for the demands of the subject and the student group.

Are you a digital native or a digital immigrant?

The terms digital native and digital immigrant were famously coined by Mark Prensky (Prensky, M. 2001: 2) and have been taken up by many writers on eLearning. Although the term has also been criticised as too simplistic, it does help us to understand the vastly different world in which our students have grown up. Prensky poses the following questions, among others, to help us to see whether we are digital natives, who were born into this digital world, or immigrants, who have had to learn the new ways as if it were a foreign country:

- Do you print out your emails?
- Do you read text before you look at graphics?
- Do you ask people to come to look at your screen to show them an interesting website?
- Do you phone someone up to ask if they got your email?
- Do you read the manual?
- Do you prefer to read from a screen? To write onscreen?


Many of us as university lecturers would tend to be digital immigrants. Even as Faculty eLearning Coordinator from 2007 to 2009 and as someone who has long experience of the use of technology in education (Coverdale-Jones, 1998, 1999, 2002), I can still answer ‘yes’ to some questions. Our students are communicating in different ways, so we should be teaching them by using the
appropriate technology. Our classrooms have changed and the places of learning outside the classroom have moved from the Library to Resource Centres and online platforms. In a students’ study bedroom they use a computer to connect to resources on the Internet and on the university VLE. For an example of this, see the film (which could not be played in the conference hall) and the transcript, where a young Scottish student called Laura talks about the mix of activities – “learning and not learning” she uses in her bedroom as well as the at the university Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University. Finally in the film she does go into a real classroom as well!

This is Blackboard, which is our virtual learning environment that we use. So you can go into the website and you can get all your course information off it. Whilst you’re in Uni and whilst you’re at home. They put all the lecture notes up, so that you can have the lecture if you miss it and they’ve got all the course handbooks that they gave us at the start - for when you lose them! And bulletin boards where everyone just asks questions, and one of our lecturers would reply. Which was really handy coming up towards exam time. (The Learner’s Voice (JISC 2009)

http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/avfiles/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/laura.wmv

Even though part of her learning is still in a class, Laura is clearly a digital native. Glasgow Caledonian University has provided appropriate learning resources (including Blackboard) for her to use her digital skills optimally and to improve them.

The use of eLearning at the University of Portsmouth

The University of Portsmouth has invested in staff and resources to support eLearning, under a two-year funding plan (2007-2009, now ongoing) to boost the use of eLearning in all faculties. A University eLearning Strategy was drawn up, and faculties and departments also have their own specific Strategies and Action Plans. In all faculties an eLearning Coordinator post was created; in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies additionally four (later five) roles of Online Course Developer who help academic staff with the technical and pedagogical aspects of using eLearning for their units.

Over the course of the last two years there has been a considerable increase in the use of Blackboard, and a noticeable change in the attitudes of many academic staff towards eLearning. It has become more ‘the norm’ to use the platform for course delivery. This use varies from those who use the VLE as repository for documents, photographs and Powerpoint lecture slides only, to those who use the interactive aspects (discussions, quizzes, journals). This use can be seen to be developing over time as word-of-mouth comments between colleagues as well as presentations at Learning and Teaching conferences within the university are able to spread good practice across the university. (See also the webpages we have created for our Faculty - http://www.port.ac.uk/staffessentials/departments/faculties/humanitiesandsocialsciences/learningandteaching/).

One example of good practice was from a lecturer in Journalism:
• What features of the course show example of good practice?

‘Everything that students need is there. They find it particularly satisfying that they have direct access to relevant articles – they say ‘all this is at our fingertips’. Largely because I did my degree with the OU (the Open University) and was provided with all sources, I have tried to replicate this. Some students don’t use it, even though it is there. The result of this has been two firsts in a fairly small group, one piece was of publishable quality. Students are very comfortable with reading onscreen, so this is a much better way of doing it. When I first taught Journalism there was a problem with getting students to read books. They enjoy it and get an extra dimension; this raises the bar. Most of the Journalism team are technosavvy.

I have seen many examples of good practice amongst my colleagues in the four schools of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies. The variety of degree subjects in the faculty using good practice in e Learning ranges from a Masters course in Politics, Fraud and Corruption for Criminal Justice to English Literature, from General English language to Journalism.

Do teachers have to change?

This question has been raised in many discussion fora and presentations at conferences, for example by Bobby Elliott, from the Scottish Qualifications Agency, at an eLearning Symposium at the LLAS Subject Centre at the University of Southampton in January 2009. Elliott raises some interesting questions here. One is on the changing role of the teacher and the learner in our new e-environment; should we still be teaching in the way that university lecturers taught a hundred years ago? Shouldn’t we be keeping up with our students or providing them with learning opportunities which are adapted to their learning styles? He also looks at e-pedagogy and concludes that we do not have a fully developed e-pedagogy yet. http://www.llas.ac.uk/video/17. What we have is guidelines, such as those from the JISC e-learning programme (http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning.aspx) and many research studies on how well eLearning works with different student groups and subjects. Some of these can also be found on the JISC webpages above, also on those of the Higher Education Authority (e.g. Enhancing Learning through Technology: A guide to resources provided by the Academy and JISC collaboration network http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/learningandtech/eltcollaborationguide&site=york)

Elliott maintains that we should not just use the eLearning platform as a repository for one-way communication, although this is a first step which can develop into the infinitely better processes of interactive learning or two-way communication, for interactivity and student engagement. As we aim nowadays not to have students who are “passive”, we do not just present them with journal articles or lecture notes to read, we set up activities where they have to contribute considered ideas or undertake an online task.

The use of the VLE for Language Learning units

Some aspects of the VLE lend themselves particularly well to language learning, where students have to deal with the skills content as well as other subjects where the subject content is to the fore. Student engagement can be enhanced through students creating or contributing to the
materials online themselves. The University of Portsmouth has an Institution-Wide Languages Programme (IWLP) for example:

- These units (IWLP) on the VLE include streamed links to recordings from TV programmes, for which copyright permission from the BBC was obtained.
- Some units have quizzes where students can self-test for example in grammar exercises.
- Others have tests within the VLE, where the mark is recorded and counts towards the final mark.
- In other units students are asked to write contributions to the discussions of issues set by the tutor in the Discussion Board area of the VLE and to respond to other students’ posted messages. In some courses, these messages constitute part of the student mark for the semester.
- In some units students are asked to make voice recordings using the software in the VLE or other audio software and to ‘post’ these in the VLE unit for other students or the tutor to listen to. Tutors make ‘podcasts’ recordings of introductions to each week’s theme, or add audio to a Powerpoint presentation which students can then use to revise, released only after the lecture has taken place, if the lecturer wishes. It is also possible to make ‘podcasts’ for feedback on assessed work.

The future of eLearning

There is no doubt that eLearning is here to stay, although it will certainly develop and extend itself as the technology and use of virtual communication develops in the wider world. The use of VLEs is now an accepted part of Higher Education in the UK as in other countries. Some researchers are looking at newer developments such as other networked solutions and software (wikis, blogs, audio and programming software), videoconferencing and even Facebook and Twitter. A recent journal edition was devoted entirely to mobile learning (delivering courses to the student’s phone) - see the ReCALL issue on this (ReCALL, Volume 21, Issue 02, May 2009).

In a keynote speech at the EUROCALL conference in Gandia, Spain in 2009 Steven Thorne pointed out that there are 1.7 billion Internet users worldwide, that 1 in 10 individuals in the U.S. have started a blog, that 16 million or more worldwide users play World of Warcraft and that 90% or more of students use Facebook & other social media, there are 3-5 million new Facebook users per week. In this environment the other possibilities are being considered include learning through games and social networks, an approach advocated by Marc Prensky, Steve Thorne and others. Thorne maintains that this is not a simple adoption of technology for its own sake, but of adaptation. Students can be asked to “bring in and seriously analyse relevant examples of communicative activities and genres”, using goals which “extend beyond language proficiency to intercultural symbolic competence” (Thorne, 2009).

So we can see that here are already many technologies which are being explored and developed further for use in the learning of languages and other subjects. We can also see that there is a
willingness and a curiosity to experiment with this and to consider the benefits carefully. Many of these activities can be linked to or placed within the VLE so that the students has one virtual “place” to access all online learning activities.

References


Higher Education Authority (2009) http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/technology/journals.php
Higher Education Authority (2009) Enhancing Learning through Technology: A guide to resources provided by the Academy and JISC collaboration network http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/learningandtech/eltcollaborationguide&site=york

JISC e-Learning programme http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elearningprogramme


1 “technosavvy” is a slang term for someone who is familiar with the use of technology.
2 The streaming server allows students to view, but not to download the video recordings. As the VLE is password-protected, the copyright of the BBC is protected.