



INVESTIGATING AND MENCHMARKING BEST PRACTICE IN ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING AT UHI

Heddle, D., and Jennings, A. (2015)

INTRODUCTION

This research project took forward a recommendation from an LTA Scholarship received in 2013-14: Clarke *et al.* (2014) to “evaluate the efficiency of various blended learning strategies”. The key research questions addressed were:

1. What does UHI actually offer in terms of blended learning and how does that conform or differ from the prevailing paradigm?
2. What works best in terms of the student experience?
3. How can UHI improve their offering?

The researchers undertook a literature review followed by a survey of student views on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and a review of a selection of module sites on the VLE that were identified as examples of good practice by staff.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Student views of the VLE

- Students regarded the VLE as an important part of their learning: 85% of respondents to the survey rated the VLE as equally or more important than VC sessions or recorded lectures; rising to over 90% for students who identified as studying wholly online.
- Students found the VLE most enjoyable and effective when it was used for interacting with staff and other students e.g. discussion boards, chatrooms, group work. The use of the VLE as solely a repository for course information was not appreciated with one student commenting that the most effective module spaces on the VLE were “*Those where the lecturers still made the effort to interact and teach rather than dumping materials on Blackboard and leaving you to it*”.
- Students involved in group work via the VLE on the whole found this to be a particularly positive experience (negative comments only concerned the downsides of any form of group work e.g. group members not contributing equally)

Review of module sites on the VLE

- There was a great deal of variation within the ten modules sites reviewed with no one feature of Blackboard being used by all ten except for Learning Resources, with the format of resources ranging between static Word documents and more interactive Wimba Create content
- Discussion board use also varied considerably. For example, one module there were 23 posts in total, while on another 277 posts were generated on a single thread.
- There was also variation concerning the amount of interactive material available (e.g. links to online papers/journal articles, YouTube videos, Wimba Create)
- There was no serious attempt within any of the module spaces to encourage social interaction between students

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors suggest a number of ways to improve students' VLE experience:

- Give students a more comprehensive induction into VC and all aspects of Blackboard. Supplement this with online training material (e.g. Blackboard and VC workshop in the UHI space on YouTube)
- Expand the use of joint working practices on the VLE to engage students. This could include:
 - Student reading groups
 - Joint assessment presentations (good for both social and collaborative learning)
- Allocate mentors to help staff create high quality VLE spaces using an adaptable UHI template
- Involve stakeholders in the development and design of VLE spaces e.g. alumni focus groups