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Introduction

I am delighted to be at this e-Learning conference. It is important that institutions employ e-Learning in ways that are inclusive and educationally informed. Conferences such as this one provide a valuable opportunity for practitioners, technologists and students to come together and share ideas about ways of creatively using this exciting technology.

I am aware that this conference has been held previously at the University College and this demonstrates the commitment of the university community to engage fully with the development of e-Learning. The programme today includes a range of topics including assessment, course design, blended learning and immersive learning environments.

Communications and information technology (C&IT) has the potential to significantly change higher education practice. The Internet provides high-speed communication and access to knowledge produced around the globe, at least for those who can understand the language of publication (often English) and afford subscriptions to online databases.

In this presentation I will examine some of the challenges and opportunities presented by e-Learning. I will also say something about the work we are doing at Southampton Solent University, where we launch a new VLE, Moodle (branded locally as MyCourse), for the start of the 2007/08 academic year[1].

e-Learning and UK Higher Education

Initiatives to encourage the adoption of e-Learning have occurred during a period of dramatic increase in student numbers, accompanied by a reduction in real terms of the unit of resource provided by the state. HEFCE strategy has sought to promote e-Learning in order to:

- meet the greater diversity of student needs

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[1] http://www.solent.ac.uk/mycourse (Last accessed: 29 May 2007)

- increase flexibility of provision

- enhance the capacity for integrating study with work and leisure through work-based and home-based learning

- develop approaches to individualised support for planning and recording achievements. (HEFCE, 2005)

While the HEFCE Strategic Plan for 2006-11 states:

> Our goal is to help universities and colleges to use new technology to enhance learning and teaching as effectively as they can, so that it becomes a normal part of their activities. (HEFCE, 2007)

Virtual learning environments have been a particular catalyst for the use of technology in education. 'Practitioners found them accessible because they are aligned with their existing practice in terms of preparation, delivery and assessment' (Conole, 2006, p. 82). Universities have been quick to adopt virtual learning environments despite the high costs, complexities and risks involved (Coates, James and Baldwin, 2005) and 'little evidence of educational research underpinning the high expectations created by their marketing' (Clegg, Hudson and Steel, 2003, p. 47).

The following reasons can be identified for the widespread and increasing use of VLEs:

- Improve the efficiency of teaching – A platform for delivering large-scale resource-based learning. The upfront capital investment required can be balanced against benefits such as reduced physical space demands.

- Enrich student learning - online modes can allows students to access a wide range of learning resources and materials.

- Student expectations - students arrive at university with increasingly sophisticated expectations and technological skills.

- Competition between institutions - many universities have seen virtual learning environments as a way of adding value to their traditional campus-based programmes and activities.

- Opportunity to control and regulate teaching - the virtual learning environment provides new opportunity for quality assurance and control. (Coates, James and Baldwin, 2005)

John Biggs (2003), in a textbook used by many university learning and teaching development programmes, claims that 'many people see ET [educational technology] as a fool-proof delivery system that obviates the need for expert, reflective teaching and can be run by technocrats rather than educators' (p. 225). Indeed, many systems have been used for content delivery, where knowledge is treated as a 'commodity' to be packaged and exploited (De Vita and Case, 2003).

Students

Many of our students are younger than the personal computer (invented in the early 1980s). Students today have skills, competencies and expectations very different to those we from a different generation had all those years ago. These attributes - The Information Age Mindset - were discussed by Jason Frand (2000) in an excellent article published in October 2000. The characteristics identified by Frand include:

- Computers aren't technology - technology is something that wasn't around when you were born.

- Nintendo over logic – problem-solving strategies often rely heavily on experimentation. In computer games you rarely analyse all the possible consequences before acting!

- Multi-tasking way of life – many young people seem accustomed to processing simultaneously different tasks and multiple information streams.

- Typing rather than handwriting – office productivity tools such as word processors and spreadsheets are now the preferred way of working for many of us.

- Staying connected – through social networking sites, instant messenger, text messages and sometimes email (email is not an immediate form of communication unless you are substantially based at a computer or have a mobile device). (Frand, 2000)

Analysis of the 2005 National Student Survey results suggests that teaching had by far the strongest effect on overall satisfaction:

Thus, the students who felt that 'Staff are good at explaining things', 'Staff have made the subject interesting', 'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' and that 'The course is intellectually stimulating', were the students who were most satisfied with the quality of their courses. (HEFCE, 2006)

Research and Teaching

The relationship between teaching and research is highly contested, particularly in a mass system of higher education where initiatives to increase participation and widen access challenge notions of the university as an elite institution.

It is not the intention of this presentation to explore the 'myths' (Hughes, 2005) and possible relationships between teaching and research. Indeed, research by Angela Brew (2006, pp. 39-43) suggests that academic staff hold a range of views:

- Students as 'audience' for staff research

- Students (and staff) learning through research

- The scholarship of learning and teaching (staff researching their own teaching)

The concept of 'scholarship' is often used in an attempt to explain the research-teaching nexus and build a 'bridge' between teaching and research.

Southampton Solent University

Southampton Solent University is a teaching-led institution, with key strategic priorities related to learning and teaching, knowledge transfer, community engagement and advanced scholarship.

e-Learning is an integral part of the University's Strategy for Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Development. Key objectives include:

- to provide the opportunity to all students to engage with their course of study on-line through the use of the virtual learning environment

- to support the further development of scholarly approaches to teaching and learning, seeking more productive and closer links between curriculum development and delivery and the advanced scholarship activities of staff (SSU, 2002).

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The definition of 'Advanced Scholarship' adopted by the University is deliberately inclusive, embracing subject-based research and other areas of high-level intellectual, creative and professional endeavour (SSU, 2004b).

> [Advanced Scholarship] is most simply and broadly defined as the creation of new knowledge, or the critical reinterpretation, application and transfer of existing knowledge. In established usage within higher education, advanced scholarship is university-level activity informed by, at, or extending the forefront of the academic discipline or area of professional practice. It is characterised by disciplined inquiry, which addresses and seeks to resolve significant theoretical and practical problems. (SSU, 2004a)

Most importantly, Advanced Scholarship is also expected to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. 'It must have demonstrated links with student learning, teaching, or the furtherance of higher education practice if it is to be properly valued' (SSU, 2004a).

To be considered as Advanced Scholarship an activity must meet the following criteria:

i.   results in a visible output in the public domain;
ii.   carries peer esteem; and
iii.   contains an aspect of innovation/originality (SSU, 2004a).

Advanced Scholarship embraces subject and pedagogic research, creative production, knowledge transfer, community engagement, HE activities (for example research degree supervisor or examiner) and active involvement with a professional body. It is the 'glue' that helps to integrate teaching with subject and pedagogic research. As an example, Table 1 summarises the Advanced Scholarship activities of all full-time academic staff in the Faculty of Technology during 2005/06. A total of 66 staff were employed during the reporting period and 53 staff (78.8%) recorded one or more Advanced Scholarship endeavours.

Advanced Scholarship is applicable to a wide range of activities and subject disciplines. This inclusive approach facilitates research-enhanced teaching, with staff pedagogic and subject research contributing to the enhancement of academic practice and the student experience (Wellington, 2007).

AS Type	Number of endeavours, 2005/06
Knowledge Transfer	24
Creative Production	21
Pedagogic Research	51
Subject Research	36
HE Activities	42
Professional Body	16
Community Engagement	13

Table 1: Number of advanced scholarship endeavours, Faculty of Technology

At Southampton Solent University we launch a new VLE, MyCourse (based on Moodle), for the start of the 2007/08 academic year. This will replace the LearnWise system in use at the University since 2001/02. Some pilot units were presented on MyCourse during 2006/07. The small team of educational developers is currently running training courses for staff and will migrate all content from LearnWise over the summer (LearnWise will be left in place until after summer referrals have been completed).

The VLE has been mainly used to complement traditional forms of learning and teaching. All new academic programmes are expected to include at least one blended learning unit. Some courses delivered solely by e-Leaning have not been entirely successful, a problem not unique to Southampton Solent University.

Conclusions

The following implications for policy and practice can be identified:

- Adopt a holistic approach, ensuring alignment of key institutional strategies (for example learning & teaching, research and staff development).

- Foster an inclusive, scholarly approach to teaching that is sensitive to genuine disciplinary and cultural differences. Ensure pedagogies promote active engagement with learning – students want an intellectually stimulating course with good teaching by enthusiastic staff.

- Recognise that e-Learning places new demands on students and staff.

- Provide appropriate staff development and support for online pedagogies.

- Innovate thoughtfully – it is not fair to students to want only introduce the latest features of our VLE just because we can, particularly when the educational benefits of e-Learning are not fully understood.

- Ensure quality assurance mechanisms are fit-for-purpose, in particular to allow students to feedback their views and investigate the effects on student engagement and achievement.

The key challenge for institutions is to employ e-Learning in ways that genuinely improve student learning opportunities and continue to provide teaching perceived to be of high quality by students. The development of e-Learning must also make effective use of scarce resources, particularly as students may increasingly demand improved facilities and services in exchange for higher tuition fees.

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