



12 USING BLACKBOARD TO SUPPORT PLACEMENT LEARNING

VIRTUAL LEARNING Environments (VLEs) are an increasingly common part of students' university experience. As the institution-wide VLE at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Blackboard is widely used as a teaching aid, supporting modules where the predominant mode of delivery is still 'traditional' (lectures, seminars and tutorials) and is the primary mode of delivery in some cases. There are approximately 1,800 active modules on Newcastle's Blackboard server.

Under HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 4, the University of Newcastle has been exploring the use of Blackboard to support placement learning, with an initial focus on students on the Food and Human Nutrition and Applied Biology degree programmes who undertake a compulsory one year placement.

This project aims to capitalise on students' familiarity with Blackboard to provide elements of continuity and community during their placements. As the students submit for an award validated by an external body (City & Guilds Licentiate), it is particularly important to maintain a clear connection between their placement learning and their university experience.

The students are registered onto a Blackboard 'module' during their placement. Information-based content, linked to the placement learning outcomes, is supplemented with interactive elements such as quizzes which make the materials more engaging and help to ensure that students do not treat them as a text-based resource that they can simply print at the start of the year and ignore thereafter. The quizzes are not formally assessed and students can retake

them as often as they like.

This cohort (23 students) had a wide geographical separation as well as a diverse experience of the working environment and the project has explored ways to use Blackboard to maintain contact for the group.

Noticeboards — presented as three distinct areas, these have proved to be extremely popular.

- * *Work related area* — students can post messages and discuss issues they face at work, involving others in helping them solve problems or tackle new areas of work. The placement coordinator and the project worker are both members of this group and can contribute to discussions.
- * *City & Guilds area* — students can discuss issues related to gathering evidence and preparing portfolios for submission for the City & Guilds award. Again, the placement coordinator and project worker are members of this group.

- * *Social gossip and chit-chat area* — a 'students only' area for free discussion. In the project's initial development phase, it emerged that in providing a channel for discussion the University also had an obligation to ensure the well-being of the students. This presented a dilemma since we felt it important to provide the students with a 'relaxation' area without the potentially inhibiting involvement of staff. Our solution was to ask a postgraduate student who was a recent graduate of the Food and Human Nutrition programme and was well known to the student cohort to participate in the group and to alert a member of staff if any difficulties arose.

The diary function has been used to build in submission dates for regular reports but also for student birthdays! When a user logs in, hand-in dates and forthcoming birthdays are displayed as calendar events. The informal use has been extremely popular — one of the few occasions when students have e-mailed with queries about the Blackboard materials was when technical problems in transferring materials from one version of Blackboard to another meant that the birthdays temporarily 'disappeared'.

Clearly, it is important that students who do not have access to the technology are not disadvantaged and the situation needs to be monitored for each cohort with alternative arrangements being made if necessary. As part of the aim is to maintain a sense of community, there could be a disadvantage to any student who cannot access the module since s/he would be 'excluded' from the larger group. This is something that will be explored in more depth with the participants in the pilot group as they return to the campus at the end of their placements.

A VLE provides an excellent medium for enhancing the sense of community for students on placement outside the University. As well as the continuity of contact, the use of a tool which is associated with the University learning experience helps to tie placement learning to the rest of the academic programme. The universal compatibility and accessibility of the VLE, with secure access linked to the student's University disk space, allows for safe deposit and storage of materials using the digital drop box facility. Use of the materials in the pilot phase has been high, especially in communications areas, with only limited technical and access problems. Feedback has been positive, suggesting that the experience of online support has resulted in improved provision for students on placement.

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