VLE Pilot Project Case Study

Time Management

E-Learning Development Team
Dr Eleanor Loughlin, Graduate Training Unit

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### Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Time Management (March 2006)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic theme</td>
<td>Skill development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Reflective practice; group work; online community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject area</td>
<td>Research management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student level &amp; profile</td>
<td>Postgraduate researchers (full-time and part-time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>12 (8 completed)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Key conclusions| 1. VLE-based training offers increased flexibility of access and participation in both time and place, valued by a group such as postgraduate researchers.

2. Online courses, whether long or short, demand preparation beyond technical skills for both participants and tutors to perform successfully online e.g. online negotiation skills and online mentoring skills, respectively.

3. Short online courses - as an alternative to face to face sessions - enable the application of, reflection upon, and sharing of new strategies within a supportive online community model.

4. Disparate levels of participation in group work can be exacerbated online where there is no evidence of ‘absent’ participants’ presence, causing frustration to committed contributors.
Background

The Graduate Training Unit’s Time Management training for postgraduate researchers was traditionally delivered as a half-day face to face session, in which participants had highlighted the need for follow-up in their feedback to the tutor, Dr Eleanor Loughlin. While this format still exists, a VLE-based version was therefore conceived to allow participants a longer timeframe in which to experiment with new approaches, reflect upon them and share strategies with others in similar situations.

The VLE offered a fundamentally more flexible option too for participants who typically have a range of commitments off campus. A further aspect of the rationale was to provide first hand experience of online learning, informing potential online tutoring roles that postgraduate participants would be likely to fill in line with the VLE rollout across the University.

Description of approach

The four week Time Management module was prefaced and concluded with a face to face session in March, 2006. Half of the initial four hour session was dedicated to a VLE induction held in a computer room to enable participants to begin using the module site confidently from the outset. All other activity and communication took place online, organised into ‘one stop’ weekly sets of activities and resources (a model similar to that encountered by Eleanor in an e-tutoring course she completed prior to this pilot). Group work was also employed with two groups focusing on different topics in a collaborative problem-solving manner; the informal findings of which were to be summarised and shared with the whole group.

Screen shot taken from the Exercises Content Area of Time Management
Given the fully online intermediary weeks, the discussion board was the central ‘location’ for interaction between tutor and participants, and among participants. That participants would share their experiences and reflections in a supportive way, was an underpinning value and aim for the module.

**Learning activities & tools**

The overarching learning design for the module required participants to: engage with one or more electronic resources per week (e.g. readings and tools) accessed via the module site; select a tool or template and apply it in practice; reflect on its impact; and share these reflections and suggestions with the group. A comprehensive range of resources was made available via the **Sentient resource list tool**, linking directly to the Library’s catalogue and electronic documents.

In the first week participants logged their daily activities, for example, to analyse time usage and then reported via the **discussion board** on the issues raised and changes that could be implemented.

With a goal of better managing workload, macro and micro level time management were explored during the second week, again underpinned by relevant resources, with online discussion of their application following.

The group work activity was the focus of the third week with one group of six addressing ‘Dealing with Interruptions’; the other ‘Working with your Supervisor’. Each group was directed to targeted readings and prompted to exchange ideas in response on their small **group discussion board** before posting a summary of key points to the **general discussion board** by a specified date.

In the fourth and final week, participants were encouraged to reflect on the whole course and identify three concrete changes they had or would implement in their daily practice. These conclusions were also shared on the general discussion board.

The centrality of the discussion board to the module is highlighted above, and it can be noted that each of the discussion activities was framed as a ‘requirement’ given the non-credit bearing nature of the module. In each case, participants were directed to respond to at least one other posting in an attempt to encourage online participation beyond the initial posting required by each activity. In terms of structure, the discussion board consisted of a forum dedicated to each weekly activity in addition to an ‘Icebreaker’ forum used during the VLE introduction and an ‘Online Café’ to encourage social interaction in between face to face meetings.
Student profile

As both full-time and part-time postgraduate researchers, there was a range of ages and experience represented in the March 2006 cohort, along with a range of disciplinary backgrounds. All twelve participants completed the entry survey during the VLE induction.

Experience with computers

All participants considered themselves to have easy access to computers, the majority with broadband. Two participants accessed the VLE solely from off-campus including one user located in Greece. All participants also accessed information on the web daily. However, half of the participants had never posted to a discussion board or blog, with only two participants being frequent or occasional users of online chat. A little over half of participants felt confident uploading a file to a website.

Experience with computers for learning

One quarter of participants had used a discussion board before for learning, while one third had accessed online resources for the same purpose. One third also had experience of online self-assessment such as quizzes.

One quarter of participants had used a discussion board before for learning
Expectations towards the VLE

Three quarters of participants agreed or agreed strongly that the VLE would support ideas and experience sharing among them. Two-thirds felt it would increase opportunity for discussion and debate, and a greater majority felt it would provide flexibility in terms of their study needs.

Outcomes of the pilot

The Time Management module discussed here was delivered during March 2006 (its first online version having run in January 2006 with staff). Feedback was sought from students at their closing face to face session, in addition to the entry and exit survey data collected. An interview with the tutor was conducted in July.

Activity statistics

All students accessed the module site during the VLE induction, after which three different usage patterns emerged. Four participants who contributed to the Icebreaker discussion forum made no further contributions to either the general or group discussions and did not complete the module. A further third contributed to the first week’s discussion but then contributed little from this point onward. The final third made contributions throughout the four weeks, posting multiple messages per forum.
participants; the other four posting only six. The second group did not post a summary to the main discussion board.

In breaking down the overall site hits, the discussion board received 54% of the total; the group pages 35%; and Announcements 11%.

Focus group feedback

Three major themes emerged from the focus group discussion, attended by five of the participants:

1. Flexibility and freedom

There was consensus among those present that the discussion board was central to the course. It was seen as offering flexibility of access in terms of time and location, and supporting “time to think”, “…to say things without interruption” and sharing “ideas that are a little more in-depth”. The initial weeks’ activities were seen as providing structure, which some participants agreed was more engaging than the latter weeks.

2. Awareness of VLE use relative to subject matter

There was a connection between the initial time analysis activities within the module (e.g. time log) and participants’ awareness of how they were using their computer and the VLE. Three participants described how the focus on time management influenced their usage patterns; one saying that she “used the VLE as a procrastination tool”; another identified that he could save time at the [shared] computer by printing resources off, while a third avoided spending time on things she did not want to include in the log like “playing on the computer”.

3. Frustration with varied levels of participation

The issue of disparate contribution featured strongly in the focus group discussion – both regarding small group and whole group participation. Members of the second small group experienced frustration at the lack of contribution to that group’s discussion of supervision, and the inability to discover why nothing was happening.

The emergence of a core sub-group of participants who posted regularly and valued the contributions of others who did similarly, resulted in them feeling some disappointment when the contributions of the others dwindled.

Exit survey feedback

Six participants completed the exit survey compared with twelve entry survey returns, making direct comparison of responses difficult. Several questions relating to expectations and attitudes
toward the VLE appear to broadly correspond as per Table 1 below, however the percentages are based on too few numbers to be meaningful.

The open-ended questions provide a richer picture of the participants’ experience of the module. Three responses to being asked to describe any benefits to learning experienced from using the VLE module include:

"I still feel somewhat nervous about "speaking into a void" on the discussion boards. You wonder what those who do not respond are thinking! I did find it a useful way of experiencing learning via a VLE, and would welcome more bit-size VLE courses like this."

"I found the flexibility that the VLE offered to be vital, as it enabled me to continue with the course when I had to be away from York, and to work on the tasks when I was able to."

"It was the first time I had used a VLE so I learned a lot about studying in this medium. Being able to access other people's ideas and tips was very good. There is potentially a wealth of resources to be derived for future reference - both from the resource list provided by the course leader, and from the group discussions."

Two suggestions received upon being asked how the VLE could better support learning included:

"I think the group activity needs to be more structured - perhaps get together and assign roles face to face to make sure everyone engages with the group."

"I would attend more courses like this if they were available. This course has been much better than the usual half day time management courses that the university usually offers. This has been much more in-depth, and because of being spread over one month, has encouraged more reflection on the topic. I'd also like to be able to access an on-line cafe. Doing a PhD can be very isolating and I value the communication with other students."
Table 1: Selection of results from the exit and entry surveys

(%) Exit survey results shown first, entry survey results in italics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A VLE provides flexibility to learners in terms of their study needs.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE enables instructors to provide a wider variety of learning resources for students.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE increases interaction levels between students on the course outside of class.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE makes individual students’ contributions more transparent to the instructor.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE increases opportunities for discussion and debate among students outside class.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SA** = Strongly Agree  **A** = Agree  **N** = Neutral  **D** = Disagree  **SD** = Strongly Disagree

**Instructor’s feedback**

Dr Eleanor Loughlin reported that eight of the twelve participants completed the module’s requirements - considered reasonable for a piloted new online approach. She noted that the participation of the four who did not complete dropped off at the beginning of the four weeks.

Sustaining motivation by the third week was identified as a challenge, which was in part attributed to varied levels of participation and a lack of preparedness of participants for this aspect of online learning, as discussed in below.
The notion of parallel channels of communication arose too, as Eleanor also welcomed ‘off-list’ email communication with participants which she described as more overt and explicit than the kind of communication emerging within the discussion forums.

**Student skills required & developed**

The participants identified few skill issues related to the technology. Instead they identified a need for skills specific to learning online e.g. negotiating online (in text) to encourage contributions from colleagues and discover why some were not contributing without being ‘pushy’. This was deemed to be much easier face to face, and the uncertainty generated by not knowing if people were logging in and lurking or simply not logging on was experienced as confounding by some. The timeframe seemed to have prompted participants to identify their online negotiation skills as deficit, but without an opportunity to actually develop them.

**Staff skills required & developed**

Due to prior experience of Web CT as a student, Eleanor had little difficulty in gaining familiarity with Blackboard and its navigation. She was therefore able to invest the majority of the development time in site structure and organisation, including learning how to set up the Sentient resource list, which she viewed as a valuable investment in future iterations of the module, given that many resources will remain relevant. Sentient and the VLE’s Content Management System (CMS) were the two key areas where new technical skills were required.

A greater issue Eleanor identified for her own development was online mentoring skills, particularly where all communication is text-based. Identifying the indicators of the group’s needs was described as difficult, as was judging when to intervene, to follow-up non-participation, or to simply stand off. Eleanor moved from daily checking of the discussion board to twice daily in order to strike a balance of response time and keeping on top of her own workload.
Actions for further development

- Introduce a mid-course face to face session to maintain momentum and balance the diverse preferences of participants regards online and face to face interaction.

- Introduce a group work activity at the VLE induction to facilitate group formation and a degree of social pressure to engender full group contribution.

- Broaden range of options for the small group activities to improve relevance and in turn, participation.

- Increase the range of resources appropriate to part-time researchers.

Screen shot showing use of a blog for reflective posting (as opposed to a discussion forum)

A potential tool to be used in the future within the Time Management module