

## Mapping the Learning Environment at Sheffield Hallam University

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The integration of virtual and physical learning environments presents some interesting opportunities and challenges for campus-based universities. In 2001 Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) established its e-learning@shu Project with the aim of establishing a culture where appropriate use of technology is made to complement campus-based activity. This 2-part article charts the emergence of a distributed learning environment at SHU since this date. Part 1 looks at the evolving programme of staff development that has accompanied the uptake of e-learning, while Part 2 uses research findings to explore the impact of distributed learning on the staff and student experience.

### Part 1: Development and support

Sheffield Hallam's e-learning@shu Project was charged with overseeing the piloting and implementation of a virtual learning environment (VLE), a key objective being to establish a culture where appropriate use of technology is made to complement campus-based activity. Between February – June 2001 a VLE pilot was run using Blackboard, with full production of the service beginning in September that year. Alongside the necessary investment in hardware and software to support the VLE, significant investment has also been made in offering staff development opportunities.

During the early stages of Blackboard use staff development efforts were focussed on infrastructure and functionality, to enable staff to become acquainted with the technology relatively quickly. For example, a series of institution wide events was held in May 2001 which aimed to raise awareness of Blackboard and its potential uses. Alongside presentations from staff and external visitors who shared experiences of Blackboard use were sessions that engaged people in issues such as course building and design.

Institution-wide events were just one element of a programme of development opportunities that were available. They were complemented by:

- a regular newsletter, *Newsflash*, which was tailored to topical issues in response to queries received by members of the Project. For example, the first edition was produced as a 'Health Check', designed to ensure that staff had gone through the basic necessary steps before their Blackboard courses went live with students;
- academic secondments to the Project, which were used to promote local networks of users within the schools, enhancing engagement among groups of staff, and acting as a local first point of contact for staff who were uncertain about using Blackboard;
- 3 'at elbow' advisors who offered dedicated drop-in sessions for staff, providing additional support. The focus of these sessions was largely functionality based;
- online support including a Project website containing FAQs, useful resources and contact details, and a Users' Forum on which all Blackboard instructors were automatically enrolled. The Forum complemented the website and other aspects of the support by offering practical guidance and online discussion for staff across the institution.

The individual elements of the development were organised as distinct activities which, together, produced a coherent programme of opportunities. While offering the necessary support for staff to become confident Blackboard users, they allowed staff to develop without creating an overdependence on centralised support.

### **Beyond the basics**

As staff became more comfortable with the VLE, development efforts shifted into a new phase which encouraged them to progress beyond the basics. This meant enabling them to engage innovatively with Blackboard, helping them to create pedagogically meaningful learning and teaching activities. Support for this continued to be offered through a variety of channels but, whereas earlier opportunities had focussed on getting up to speed with Blackboard's functionality, attention now turned to enhancing and advancing pedagogy. This resulted in more focussed developments such as workshops and mini-conferences that explored specific topics in depth. The one-to-one support was also reconfigured, offering targeted weeks of support on particular issues, and the Users' Forum was relaunched as a self-enrol site offering advice on how to progress with courses that had already become established.

A programme of practice-oriented research and evaluation had begun in March 2002 which, as an integral part of the Project, was closely tied in with staff development efforts. The research investigated cross-institutional issues relating to the impact of Blackboard on the learning and teaching experience, and used the findings to support and inform internal developments. Because the data used was collected from within the institution, staff were able to see the immediate relevance to their own practice. Additionally, the fact that it addresses campus-wide rather than course specific issues allowed them to explore additional aspects of practice that they hadn't yet considered. Some of the ways in which the findings have been used internally are outlined below:

- workshops and advice sessions run for groups of staff across the institution make reference to the findings of the research, eg, what do students tell us about the effectiveness of particular approaches?; how have SHU staff incorporated Blackboard into their learning and teaching?; what are the benefits and drawbacks of these approaches?;
- written guidance (including online advice, newsletters, and a series of leaflets entitled 'Beyond the Blackboard Basics') includes references to research findings alongside good practice guidance – a specific leaflet, *Ten things not to do with Blackboard*, was developed from the findings of one phase of the research, and gives good practice tips to maximise the benefits of Blackboard courses;
- findings are included in the Users' Forum and an accompanying site contains an overview of the research and evaluation project;
- specific workshops looking at students' views of online resource use have been run for Learning Centre staff, and the outcomes taken to Learning Centre committees to inform their development plans.

### **Uptake of Blackboard**

Since the pilot of Blackboard in 2001, uptake of e-learning has been driven by significant buy-in and enthusiasm from academic, academic support, and

administrative staff. Figure 1 illustrates the growth in usage since 2001, showing the number of students enrolled on at least 1 Blackboard course at key stages.

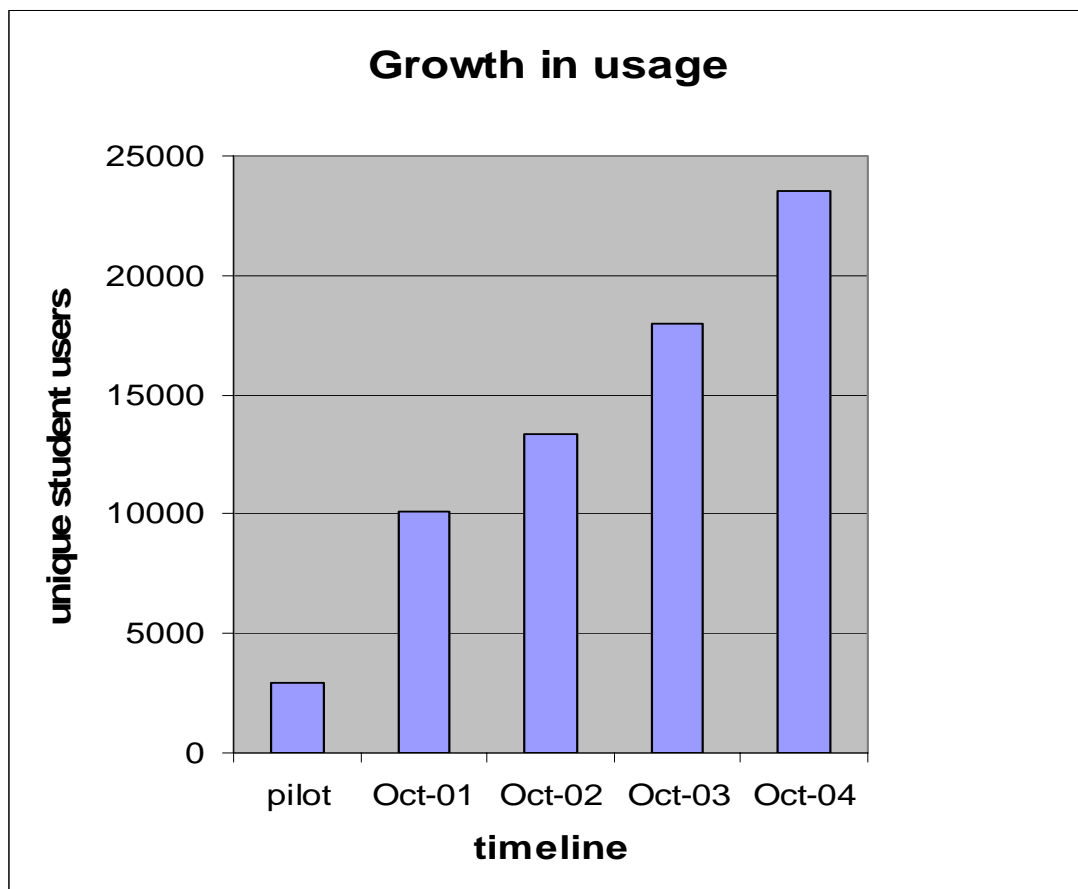


Figure 1

The staff development activities that have been offered over the course of the Project encouraged innovation, but without fostering an over dependence on centralised support mechanisms. As staff progress with their use of e-learning, and adapt to the changing environment, support and development continues to evolve in line with varying needs. What continues to be popular with staff is the opportunity to share experiences with their colleagues across the institution, and tailored "show 'n' share" events are run frequently.

The impact that the uptake of Blackboard has had on the experiences of teaching and learning are discussed in the second part of this article.

## Part 2: Distributed learning

What impact has the uptake of Blackboard had across SHU? The final part of this article looks at some of the findings from the research and evaluation project which address the impact on the learning and teaching experience.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the impact of the VLE on the student experience. Rather than evaluating the technology in isolation, the research looks at how the online and offline components of the student experience link together. It deals with issues at the campus-wide - rather than course specific - level, and has allowed the user perspective to guide the specific

areas to be investigated. To date the research has been through a number of distinct but interrelated phases, including the following:

- case study investigation into the staff perspective of using Blackboard (looking at motivation, aims, activities, impact on teaching, etc);
- observations of students working with Blackboard, combined with semi-structured interviews;
- reflective learning activity diaries completed over 2 weeks, followed by interviews;
- online surveys of new and returning students' expectations of a supportive online environment.

Each phase of the research has built on the outcomes from the previous stages, and the Project has built up a complex and contextualised picture of the learner experience. What follows is a brief summary of some of the headline themes that have emerged.

The additional flexibility offered through a blended approach is an important issue for staff and students alike. Staff understand that students have various commitments that prevent them from spending long periods of time on-campus, and online provision of resources, communication channels, etc, facilitates continuing engagement beyond the confines of the campus. This engagement is also felt to increase in-class effectiveness, encouraging more effective preparation. For students, it helps extend the sense of belonging beyond the physical setting of the institution, and increases the flexibility of the learning environment. For example, they can complete some of the more routine activities remotely, which allows them to take advantage of the social nature of on-campus study: the half hour break between lectures becomes an opportunity to socialise with peers rather than, for example, searching for resources. In-class time can also be used to complete activities that are best suited to the face-to-face situation, giving a more valuable learning and teaching experience.

Students working in more flexible environments are also able to take more control of their own learning, for example, online self-assessments help to "channel" independent learning. Part of the analysis of students' reflective diary accounts involved mapping learner activity over time, which reveals an emphasis on self-directed learning activities that students organise for themselves either individually or as a group.

Both staff and students feel that the use of Blackboard allows learners to broaden their peer support groups. Whereas students might only share additional resources within their immediate friendship group in a face-to-face situation or via e-mail, they are prepared to share them with the whole class in the "closed" environment offered by the VLE. They also appreciate the different viewpoints that they are exposed to in online discussions about a topic, and are reassured by the fact that their peers are experiencing similar issues with their studies. Students also see the online discussions as formalised social networks, allowing them to support - and be supported by - students who they often don't see on campus.

There were some areas of mismatch between staff and student perceptions. For example, because the case studies were collected relatively early on in the Project (April - September 2002) some staff were concerned that student enthusiasm for Blackboard would wear off once it became a mainstream activity.

In fact, students rarely have a one-dimensional opinion of Blackboard use, stating that it is the purpose and value of individual courses that determines how engaged they are. This is perhaps best summed up in the quote from one student who, in general, was very enthusiastic about Blackboard: "some bits are good - some bits are great - but some bits are really pointless".

What is clear is that student expectations of online provision are very high and, as they get more accustomed to being able to access necessary learning activities online for one module, their expectations continue to rise. Even where they are not exactly sure what they will be doing online, they expect that the internet will be vital to their time at university to support their studies, their lifestyle, and their future plans. Students recognise that their learning is becoming more distributed, and that formal, planned experiences are just one element of their overall experience.