

# On-line support for students on work placements, lessons learned from a pilot using WebCT, Managed Learning Environment

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## ABSTRACT

A project to create on-line support for students on professional development placements in Community, Play and Youth work contexts has provided an ideal situation to carry out a piece of Action Research. The research tracks a number of key players through the process of the introduction of a WebCT course called "Online learning support for students on Fieldwork placements". This includes the unfolding experiences of the course designers, tutors, students and administrators as the course was formulated and introduced. The paper considers a number of very practical issues that have arisen and evaluates the ways in which, and the extent to which, the introduction of this WebCT initiative has added value.

Collaboration between administrative, information services and academic staff is crucial for this initiative, and the journey of each of these people in different roles is tracked through the story of the developing project.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Community, Play and Youth Studies programme is in the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. It is one of about thirty centres for the training of people to professional qualification, endorsed by the National Youth Agency. Part of the strategy of the school is to increase the use of computers in teaching and learning. A positivist view has been taken of new technology as a force for progress, upgrading the skills and occupational status of those who work with it (Fincham and Rhodes 1992). This idea has been linked to preparing graduates for the employment market. However some academic staff are wary of this development, fearing that their skills and occupational status will be undermined. Specifically, the university has chosen the managed learning environment WebCT for use across all Schools. The university has established a Learning Development Unit (LDU), to develop and champion innovations in learning and teaching.

## THE NEED

There are about fifty full-time Community, Play and Youth Studies students on the course, and each does two assessed professional workplace placements, one assessed at level one, the other at level two. The campus-based part of the course uses group work

methods. Leaving this communal, sharing environment to go individually to placement for three months often makes students feel very isolated, particularly if they face problems. The aim of the placements is to develop reflective practitioner skills and to link theory and practice. Students are asked to journal their learning, producing a series of entries called 'recordings'. However, there has always been a danger that placement was regarded as 'real life' and university as 'academic life'. For the project, it was decided to see if the introduction of 'virtual life' could help to bridge the two worlds. Learning support for students on assignment away from the campus has been an issue, as has the need to travel into university to submit work.

Tutors visit each of their students three times at each of their placements. This is time-consuming and costly. However it is staunchly supported as a way of working by current tutors, and if the project had overtly threatened to reduce face-to-face contact with students there would have been active resistance. At least one of the placement visits is needed for Health and Safety policy purposes and to establish a working relationship with the workplace organisation. Each full-time student has a supervisor who is a senior staff member of the workplace organisation.

A further need of the department was for computerisation of the matching of students to appropriate placements.

## **THE IDEA**

The name of the project is "Online learning support for students on Fieldwork placements". A pilot is up and running using WebCT. Students can use the communication tools to keep in touch with each other from their far-flung placements and to contact their tutors. There are contents modules about reflective practice and learning from experience. Online activities support and encourage reflective practice. Students can search a database of agencies to identify a suitable placement.

## **THE KEY PLAYERS**

The designers of the project are one academic from the programme, with responsibility for the coordination of full-time students' placements, one administrator who supports the full-time programme, and one learning advisor from Information Services, who delivers WebCT training across the university.

Students are organised into professional development groups, each allocated to a tutor from the programme. These tutors have been included in the project.

An entry requirement of the programme is experience of relevant paid or voluntary work. All of the students are mature students, some are post-graduates. The programme has two emphases; one is professional development and assessment for entry to a profession, the other is academic achievement towards a university award (either a DipHE or a BPhil). Amongst the students there is a wide range of educational and Information Technology ability and experience. Some students are afraid to log on at all whilst others have high expectations because of previous access to sophisticated online resources.

## **DESIGNERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PILOT**

### **1. The Administrator**

This project offered the administrator her first training in fifteen years of employment with the programme. Prior to this she had one day of training in Microsoft Excel that was provided when the software was sold to the department. She had some trepidation about learning new skills when she is close to retirement. Past negative schooling and vocational training memories still haunted her at the start of the project and she was very fearful of being required to take part in group training sessions. Once this was understood, she was not required to - a great relief to her. Instead she was allowed uninterrupted time at the LDU computer suite, with one-to-one coaching from the Learning Advisor, guidance notes and time to develop skills at her own pace. She found the Learning Advisor very helpful and not at all patronising, contrary to some of her past bad experiences.

To start with she concentrated on learning Microsoft Access so that she could enter data for the Active Server Pages. Later, as her confidence grew, she became involved in co-designing the WebCT course and learning to administer it. The project has transformed the way that she does her job. She feels included in the change and has met with personnel to appraise them of the way in which her work is altering. The main frustration during the project has been that she has access to much better hardware and software at the LDU than her workstation in the office. This is being rectified but has taken time and negotiation to resolve. Being a part-time member of staff is a challenge when managing the online course because it changes from day to day. Students do not always remember that staff are not at their desks "24-7".

### **2. The Academic**

She had limited knowledge but enthusiasm for e-learning having just completed the Open University course "You, Your Computer and the Net". More than ten years of direct involvement with the placements modules of the programme paved the way for her taking on a new role as placements coordinator about a year before Learning Development secondments were advertised. Initially the role of placements coordinator was a tedious paperwork task which had to be fitted in on top of existing teaching and tutoring commitments. The secondment transformed it into an opportunity. Firstly, secondment involved being relieved of teaching responsibilities in order to innovate in teaching and learning. Secondly, it presented a chance to computerise the administration of the placements and to address some of the weaknesses and issues around placements as a learning strategy. Thirdly it was a clear staff development opportunity for her and others.

The first phase of the project was frustrating in that it involved a lot of negotiation about time and money and very little innovation in teaching or learning. The next phase, looking at other similar initiatives, revealed resources in other universities that were preponderantly administrative. Online resources consisted mainly of handbook-style course design suggestions, that treated workplace placements, rather than e-learning, as the innovation. This programme has been using placements for thirty years. She has since discovered an example of e-moderating groups of students on placement, by means of a bulletin board.

Training in becoming a designer of a WebCT course was the fun and easy part. It was individual, as opposed to project management involving a lot of people later in the project; and was easier than expected. An early decision to involve the Learning Advisor was well worth it. This meant less pressure to learn to a particular standard quickly, tailor-made training and short cuts via advice from experts. Project leaders' meetings within the LDU offered helpful support and advice.

At the outset her concerns focused on the technical challenge, but this quickly gave way to challenges of educational design and then managing change. The project had to be introduced in such a way that it would become a new way of doing a significant component of the work of all of the staff of the programme. She had underestimated the resistance to change that there would be by some staff and students. Overcoming this resistance became a central purpose of the project.

### **3. The Learning Advisor**

The Learning Advisor was approached to help with this project as part of his role as a supporter of web-based learning and teaching projects at the university. He has a thorough knowledge of Windows-based Office applications, as well as several years of experience in designing, developing, managing and administering online learning environments using the university's chosen managed learning environment, WebCT. He felt he could gain from this project in discovering a greater knowledge of the pedagogical issues surrounding course development. It also gave him the opportunity to build on skills in key areas, such as database-driven websites using Active Server Pages, and the integration of such technology with WebCT.

One hundred hours of the Learning Advisor's time was ring-fenced, using money from the LDU to allow for work on this project. Initial discussions and meetings with regard to the course structure gave way to developmental work on the database-driven parts of the course. When completed, the remaining time was spent on staff development, improving the skills level of both the academic and the administrator with regard to running the course. Also, several sessions were run for the course tutors on using the various communication tools within WebCT. This skills development work was undertaken in a series of one-to-one meetings in the LDU, supplemented by the use of guides to good practice produced by the Learning Advisor. It was important for the Learning Advisor to support the academic, tutors and administrator, enabling them to have as full a role as possible in the running of the course, keeping ownership of it away from someone approaching it from a technical standpoint.

The Learning Advisor feels that the people with whom he has worked on this project have benefited from a sharing of skills and ideas, and that he has benefited himself from the pedagogical input of the academic. The project represents a challenging use of WebCT, and its success has generated interest across campus, which may lead to future projects, for which the Learning Advisor is now in a better position to offer support.

## **TUTORS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PILOT**

### **1. Fresher Tutor**

This tutor found the new course effective. He has a tendency to regard it as an administrative and networking tool rather than as e-learning. This is in keeping with the culture of the programme. Computers are regarded as a means of doing administration, not teaching or learning. Secretarial staff had work stations long before tutors did. None the less, he has been enthusiastic about the project. He has responded to all requests to use the project with his students, but has not a sufficient sense of ownership to become a creator. He practised use of the chat tool with his students when asked to do so, but has not developed its use.

### **2. Second Year Tutor**

This tutor welcomed the project as a means of reducing the tutor's role in fixing up placements. He thought of the project as centralisation of responsibility for the placements modules. He received mail messages from students by redirecting them out of WebCT into his regular e-mail account, posted no messages, and worked off-line with on-line information. At the last minute he was unable to attend a workshop about chat rooms. On the sole occasion he tried to arrange a chat the server went down so he became frustrated with it. In spite of this, he says that he has a sense that there is a lot of potential for the project. He says that the designers need to allow time for the project to be accepted in the culture of the programme and that other staff will gradually explore its uses.

### **3. 'Cover' Tutor**

This tutor lacked IT skills and confidence with computers. Students were resistant to the 'cover' tutor replacing 'the academic' so that she could be seconded. She needed individual support to log on and to look through messages and wanted messages printed off for use in paper form. She admitted to a block of anxiety (Rogers 1986) preventing her attendance of a group workshop about chat rooms. There is a real difficulty for tutors who are operating at stage one of Gilly Salmon's model (Salmon 2000) when they are expected to e-moderate a student group including some students who are keen to get to stage five and are already operating at stage four.

### **4. Post-Graduate Tutor**

This tutor quickly appreciated the administrative efficiency of the project. The system showed up some weaknesses in the database that she spotted quickly, such as a lack of play placements in particular areas. She came to a tutors' workshop and really enjoyed it, beyond her own expectations. She was proactive with her student group about use of 'mail' but has not really facilitated use of chat rooms or the bulletin board yet. However, she positively intends to do so and is enthusiastic about the possibility opened up for student to student contact. Faced with a period of illness, she suggested increased use of the WebCT module as part of her cover strategy.

## **STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PILOT**

### **1. Freshers**

First year students took the pilot project to be the way the placement module was normally delivered. They asked practical how-to questions when introduced to the module and were generally impressed, with the exception of enthusiasts who wanted more visual sophistication. Generally the whole first year group conformed to using WebCT. Barriers to participation were about technical ability and registration onto the course. Several individuals feared computer use in general and their tutor supported them in getting started. Before starting, several students asked about availability of access to the Internet. So far there have been no complaints, they have somehow found a way.

### **2. Second Years**

From second years there was active resistance. They repeatedly expressed a wish to retain the old ways. There was representation complaining to management about having to use a new unfamiliar medium. Many and various attempts were made to flout the system! They feared loss of face-to-face tutor contact. They are accustomed to being consulted about curriculum developments and felt that this had not been done. Adult learning principles can help to explain some of this resistance. Stress acts as a block to learning (Brundage and MacKeracher 1980) and they felt stressed by the idea of losing their tutor and of working with new technology. Prior learning experiences have the potential to interfere with new learning (Knox 1977). Active learner participation and collaborative modes of teaching and learning are most effective. These students felt comfortable doing things the way they had learned previously and felt that methods were being imposed upon them rather than developed with them.

### **3. Post-Graduates**

Like first years, these new students did not take the pilot as an innovation but assumed that it was already the established way of doing this module. This is a smaller group than the other cohorts are and the WebCT communication tools suit their group size. Most have used IT for study purposes in some way before, some extensively. This is a group who have taken part positively in the module. Their tutor's attitude has helped with this. Equally their attitude has encouraged her.

## **LESSONS ABOUT MANAGING CHANGE**

The first lesson of the pilot is to introduce new WebCT courses with new students! There has been unanticipated active resistance from existing students.

Investing in tutor staff development is important; we will need to do more. Some staff are keen and some are resistant. New learning changes will sometimes be strenuously resisted (Rogers 1986), this project underestimated this. Offering the opportunity to opt in rather than imposing participation on tutors works best. A good decision for this pilot was to work around resistant staff. It was possible to do this by selecting a particular student group for the pilot, full time students. This was a subtle way of removing 'poor performers' (Stewart 1993).

Some tutors are not against the idea on principle, but fear being less competent than the students are in the use of information technology. For these staff support will be offered individually as well as in groups. The project leader has had to personally explain and obtain commitment to the project from a range of key players. The project recognised that people will support what they help to create. However, the programme is too big to include everyone in the decision making process, and decisions had to be made to proceed with the project when some students and staff were not in favour. The interests of a range of people all need to be taken into account in the development of this learning resource and a narrow focus on technology avoided.

"Any narrow focus on technology must be avoided by emphasising the interest of the groups involved and the social elements in the context of work" (Fincham and Rhodes p. 243)

## **LESSONS ABOUT PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY**

The pilot is a reminder of how fearful and blocked some people are in relation to getting started with use of computers for educational purposes. Learners can feel considerable anxiety (Smith 1982). Adults tend to take errors personally and to let them affect their self esteem (Zemke and Zemke 1984). The project needs to be reviewed with greater attention to the fears of both students and tutors as adult learners.

Since some people got stuck at the stage of accessing the system (Salmon 2000), the project needs to provide better guidance on where to find technical support and how-to guides. The revised design will build in reasons why students need to access the module and have little alternative. These include assessment points, and information that is unavailable any other way. More facilitated structured activities are needed to get people started with use of the communication tools. During the pilot the design tried to get students and tutors to the stage of more open facilitated activities and of development of reflective practice too quickly (Salmon 2000).

Inclusion of students in the decision about starting to use new technology, and in design discussions is important. Those who are used to other methods of learning do not respond well to any new method being imposed. Their needs and concerns need to be listened to.

## **THE NEXT PHASE**

Promotional work will be done to champion the benefits of e-learning in order to assist a culture shift from computers for administration towards computers for learning. More staff development is planned with tutors especially around e-tutoring, group work on-line and responding to students on-line.

For the pilot, the tutors of full-time students were involved but not those of part-timers. There is a plan to discuss the pilot and to decide about future inclusion of all of the part-time students and their tutors, supervisors and line managers, and the administrator who supports the part-time programme. This will bring in a further challenge, how to include staff members who are part-time employees of the university, in some cases hourly paid. Part-time students' placements are organised differently than full-time students' placements. The introduction of this project to the part-time route of the programme will be both an expansion and a new development, requiring new resources and adaptations of the project as it was piloted. There are institutional matters that need to be resolved, such as access to work stations and registration with passwords and access to the course for people who are not staff or students of the university, namely supervisors and work placement line managers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Introducing use of a managed learning environment was more a change-management project than a design project. Collaboration between School administrative and academic staff, Information Services staff and the LDU has proved creative and productive. In time the project has won acceptance as the new way of doing this aspect of the curriculum, subject to some design modifications.

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