

# Developing the Virtual Learning Environment



Commenced: 2005

## What is it?

This project aims to promote learner autonomy by:

- Setting up an expectation that students make use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to submit drafts and final copies of their work for peer and tutor feedback.
- Encouraging students to reflect on their personal learning and to share this online with peers and tutors using the new Blackboard blogging facility.

It is intended to pilot the use of individual Blackboard journals with students starting on the E-Learning, Multimedia and Consultancy (ELMAC) Programme. Students and tutors working on this programme form an international online community. Local face-to-face sessions are also regularly held in Sheffield and also in Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

The use of this new facility to support learning on the Open and Flexible Learning Environment (OFLE) module will be evaluated and it is hoped to establish how this facility might be used to support student reflection and learner autonomy on other courses, particularly Primary Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses.

## What is involved?

Work on the OFLE module involves critically examining the elements and pedagogical principles of open learning environments, the relation between learning and technology in different learning environments and the role of technology in the construction of open learning environments. Students studying on this module are therefore well placed to consider the implications for future use of any new Blackboard facility, especially when experiencing its use to support their own learning.

A separate journal area is set up for each student in the Blackboard site. Students "own" their own journal area and are expected to post ongoing work and reflections to this area. They are also able to post comments into the journals of other students enrolled on this module, who are based here or in Nijmegen. A discussion board is also set up to allow students and tutors to post comments about the practical and technical aspects of using the journals.

Once the module is completed, the use of the individual journal areas will be evaluated and feedback taken from students and tutors.

## Why is the project important to the CETL and the University?

The utilisation of new technology has often been considered a pedagogical reform but the real changes are in learning and in the pedagogical activity of teachers and educational organisations. Just because technology is available it doesn't automatically mean that learning will be increased or even supported by this technology. The results of this project will support wider University research into the use of blogs and wikis and help establish if it is worthwhile continuing to provide for these within the Blackboard VLE here at the University. If it is decided to continue to provide this facility, the results of this project will help inform future use of Blackboard journals for supporting learning, teaching and assessment.

Through dissemination of results of this project on the use of this facility for engaging students in reflection and peer feedback, tutors will be able to make better informed choices about the usefulness of this facility within their own area and individual modules. It is hoped that extending the provision of an electronic space, such as in a Blackboard journal, where students can take personal responsibility for how and when they engage with their work and also reflect on their own learning could help to promote learner autonomy across the University.

## What do you hope the project will achieve?

It is hoped that students, initially on the OFLE module, and subsequently on other modules, will find that engagement with the journal facility enhances their learning and also leads to a more in depth understanding of the factors that affect personal learning. By providing an easy to use, personal electronic space where students can submit ongoing work for electronic feedback from peers and tutors it is hoped to promote more use of formative assessment within courses. It is believed that engaging students in this process will help them become more autonomous learners.

.This project will lead to an increase in the number of staff who know how to use this new Blackboard facility to support student personal reflection and learning. This will, hopefully, lead to enhancement in the quality of the student learning experience in at least two areas within the University.

### **What impact do you hope the project will have?**

Dissemination of the results of this project across the University and to the wider community may contribute to enhanced learning, teaching and assessment by helping inform colleagues of the possibilities of using electronic journals to promote learner autonomy through engagement in self reflection and formative feedback.

The initial impact of this project will be on learning and teaching within the OFLE module of the ELMAC programme. The second phase of the project will be to introduce this facility to a small cohort of approximately 18 Primary ICT specialists studying on the BA Primary ITT Programme and depending on the results of this it may be subsequently "rolled out" to up to 850 students on Primary ITT courses.

### **Future Developments**

This project is part of an ongoing development that is looking at *Developing the Virtual Learning Environment* within the university. This has recently involved looking at the use of the Blackboard VLE to support the Primary ITT courses and the staff training to support this use. This has led to individual Blackboard courses being set up to support each taught module on the Primary Programme and also a Primary Programme Blackboard Organisation being set up to provide generic information and space for year and tutor group discussion. A similar Blackboard Organisation is in the process of being developed for the Professional Development Programme: Education (PDPE) area.

Another recent development which is almost at the end of the piloting stage is the design and implementation of a web based Partnership Portal which will be available to be used by all students, tutors and school based mentors involved in SHU Primary and Secondary Initial Teacher Training. Experience gained from these projects is now being used to establish ways of supporting Newly Qualified Teachers on their induction year, through the use of a virtual learning environment. The University is currently working with Sheffield Local Education Authority (LEA) to establish a pilot project.

### **Links**

#### **Course web site:**

MSc in e-Learning, Multimedia and Consultancy

<http://www.shu.ac.uk/msce-learning/>

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