

Leading Change – Integrating E-Learning Into an Existing Course

Abstract: Liz Polding writes about her experiences of integrating e-learning resources into existing law courses at the Oxford Institute of Legal Practice, and shares her experiences of how to ensure that their introduction and use is accepted by tutors who may not have much relevant experience. Resources used include open source options, such as Moodle, webcams, pod casts, interactive noticeboards, chatrooms and e-portfolios.

Keywords: law courses; e-learning; law schools; virtual learning environments; training materials

Introduction

There are many drivers for change in all levels of education. Most higher education institutions are experiencing resource management issues. In many cases, increased student numbers are not necessarily matched by a proportionate increase in resources. For those involved in professional training, the requirements of professional bodies are evolving, with a trend towards increased flexibility to ensure a diverse range of entrants into the professions. In addition, an acknowledgement that students learn in different ways, and will therefore wish to have information presented in different ways, has led to increased use of non-traditional methods of teaching to help meet these needs.

E-learning is endemic at all levels of education and those coming to higher education now have, in the main, been exposed to this type of learning far more than those in their position twenty, ten or even five years ago. They are more used to e-learning as a complement to more traditional methods.

Strategy

In terms of the introduction of IT into an existing course, it is important for management and tutors to understand that there are many reasons why its introduction can be beneficial. The management of precious resources, such as staff and facilities, can benefit from including some e-learning elements in existing courses. For example, some of the more didactic elements of a small group or workshop session, or the checking of preparation, can be carried out using an e-quiz or e-exercise. This then frees up time for more student-led activities during face-to-face contact time.

There can be resistance to the introduction of IT into a course. Many established tutors can see it as a threat – the fear of being replaced by a computer. However, if e-learning material is to be effective, it must be written by experienced and highly skilled practitioners who know their subject well. They must also understand what does and does not work in an e-learning context. In addition, materials need to be reviewed and updated to take account of new ideas and developments, if the course is to remain fresh and dynamic. This is likely to mean changes in the way practitioners work, but does not necessarily point to a need for fewer or less experienced practitioners.

The benefits to staff of introducing IT include a shift in small group sessions from the tutor-led didactic approach, to a more student-led practical session. Ideally, teaching should be student-led where possible and, as briefly considered above, the use of IT can be used to help ensure that tutor-led elements are reduced in contact time. For example, in a session on procedures required for the completion for a sale of a business, the preparation might comprise some reading plus peer or self-assessed questions. The tutor can either assume that this has been done adequately by all class members, or he can spend time at the start of the class checking that this is so.

If the tutor assumes that everyone has completed their preparation unless they say otherwise, it is likely that at least a small number of the class members will not have done so, but will “free-ride” by using other students to catch up. This causes resentment in those who feel that they are being unfairly treated by not being rewarded for having prepared, and by being exploited in this way. It also means in many cases that the free-riders’ study habits are inadequate in the long run.

The alternative – checking preparation in class – means a tutor-led style which takes up valuable time that could be spent on more student-centred learning

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exercises, such as role plays and practical group or individual exercises. It also plays to the free-riders since they can still feed off the answers given by others, fuelling further resentment.

An IT solution to this issue is the interactive exercise. For example, an e-quiz can check preparation and understanding and provide data for both tutor and student. If, for example, a multiple choice quiz is used to check preparation, the student receives immediate feedback on her performance. Equally as important, the tutor receives feedback which tells him who is doing well and may need more of a challenge, who is doing poorly and needs more support, and who is simply not doing anything. In fact, for some students, the knowledge that it is possible for tutors to check whether exercises have been completed is motivating in itself.

Planning and piloting

Planning is critical to ensure that tutors incorporate new IT features into their own courses. Piloting is a useful process, as the new feature has already been considered and tutors can see what can be done. Piloting also provides tutors with sources of ideas for their courses, as they can see how the new features work and may better assess what will work in their own areas. The fact that the pilot stage allows for feedback and for any issues arising to be addressed, means that tutors including new ideas in their course have experience on which to draw. This empowers tutors and may encourage them to try something they might not otherwise have considered.

Tutors trying new IT elements in their courses need to work with information and learning resources professionals to ensure that a blended course is achieved, rather than an traditional course with bolt-ons which are not really part of the course. While new elements are being run for the first time, tutors also need to feel that they are supported and that help is there if it is needed.

Once the blended course has run for the first time, the individual module leaders and their teams need to reflect on how the course has run with the new elements, and how it could be improved. If something did not work, they can consider why not, and how things could be amended to improve the course and they can revise the elements which jar. The review and reflection process also needs to be wider, including staff from other teams, so that best practice can be shared and new piloted features can be considered for inclusion next time.

Feedback

The issue of preparation is an obvious way in which IT can assist both tutors and students. As was briefly considered above, the feedback issue is a further concern which can be addressed to some extent using IT. Many students complain that they do not receive enough feedback. It is accepted that feedback is critical if there is

to be genuine reflection on performance and deep learning is to occur. Ideally, many students would probably prefer to hand in every piece of work for grading, so that they receive constant, individualised feedback. This is unlikely to be practical for most institutions. Interactive exercises can provide a solution here, as they give both parties – tutor and student – feedback which can be used to improve success. If a student does poorly on an exercise, this alerts both parties to the fact that they need to consider taking action, for example by offering additional support. The use of formative assessment on a continuous basis in this way ensures that the course is well-aligned and that the likelihood of a nasty shock in the summative assessment is greatly reduced.

If IT is to be incorporated, it does mean that tutors will have to undertake a significant amount of work to set up the resources. However, although the process is front-loaded, the benefits become apparent in the long term and, once the resources are in place, they should not need any more work to maintain them than traditional written course materials.

It is worth taking the time to ensure that tutors understand why the integration of IT is being undertaken and the potential benefits. If tutors are consulted on this issue, and the benefits are explained, they are less likely to be hostile and resentful. It is important to emphasise that the integration of IT is not really about wholesale replacement of traditional teaching, nor is it about replacing people with machines. There will never be a substitute for skilled practitioners, who use a variety of resources and methods in their teaching to sustain interest and cover a range of learning styles. The use of IT is simply another resource, another method, an opportunity for tutors to learn new skills and vary their work, not a threat to their existence.

Available resources

In a growth area like educational IT, there are many resources available to practitioners. Information management professionals will be familiar with the variety of electronic research tools which tutors and students have available to them. Many such resources are subscription based and will involve a cost to the institution, but many are freely available from the internet. There are also a huge number of blogs on every conceivable subject which can be used (with caution in some cases) as a resource. RSS feeds are also available from a wide variety of sources including the BBC. Sources such as wikipedia are increasingly cited in student and academic papers, although arguably these should be referenced as to date and time, rather than just date, given that the resource may be edited by anyone at any time. Educational publishers are also adopting the interactive model in their texts, with OUP introducing multiple choice questions and web-based resource banks as part of their legal practice course manuals.

Moodle

As web-based resources increase in popularity, the availability and use of open source options also increases. The Oxford Institute of Legal Practice (“Oxilp”) uses an open source virtual learning environment. Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (“Moodle”) was written and is developed by Martin Dougiamas in Australia. The package combines sound pedagogy with high quality technical features and the author has made extensive use of this package in Oxilp’s courses as part of the ongoing program of integration for IT.

Open source software is essentially free software subject to conditions which vary, but in most cases the software is free to use, with support above a minimum level being for fee. For most open source software programs, there are various individuals and companies with the necessary expertise to provide support as required. For Moodle, there is a virtual community with thousands of users worldwide, including the Open University and its Canadian equivalent, Athabasca University. Any user who develops anything new for Moodle shares it with the rest of the community. There are various Moodle conferences worldwide, where members of the community meet to share ideas and best practice. The UK conference is organised by the Oxilp IT systems manager, Sean Keogh, and the author, and was kindly hosted by the Open University in Milton Keynes this year.

The adoption of Moodle by the Open University has been a tremendous validation boost to Moodle as a system and has meant that many institutions are now looking seriously at open source for the first time, rather than regarding it as a poor relation of the commercial systems.

Integrating Moodle

The integration of Moodle into Oxilp’s teaching has increased hugely since the IT systems manager and the author first began piloting its use in 2002/03. Initially, the system was used to store course materials, distributed lecture slides and handouts, provide revision notes and to post answers to peer and self-assessment questions in a web-accessible resource.

The author piloted features in selected courses as a method of ensuring that the new feature would work pedagogically and practically before recommending it to other tutors for use in other courses. This method of integration also allowed the author to obtain feedback from students which could be used to provide guidance for tutors.

Discussion boards and chat rooms

The author trialled discussion boards in 2003/03. The idea of peer communication and sharing ideas, particularly for

students who were quiet in a live situation, but might find a voice in a virtual environment, was attractive. There was also the chance for a tutor to monitor discussions and offer help. Unfortunately, the idea proved unpopular, due largely, it appeared, to the nature of Oxilp’s student cohort. Oxilp students were full-time and therefore saw little value in such a resource. If they could speak to someone in person over coffee, they saw no need to speak to that person via the medium of a discussion board. The author therefore proposes that when the Oxilp part-time Legal Practice Course is launched in 2007, the discussion board should be trialled again, as those with less frequent face-to-face peer contact may value the virtual contact as a way of maintaining that interaction.

Other piloted features have included chatrooms, which proved popular and received positive feedback from students. They were particularly useful to those who needed to go home to revise and could not easily come into the Institute to speak to a tutor. This also addresses the issue of diversity, allowing mature students and those with families more flexible access to their tutors.

Multiple choice questions

The issue of interactive exercises for preparation and formative assessment has been considered earlier in this paper. Multiple choice exercises are also used as follow-up to aid retention in more information-heavy subjects. The Oxilp multiple choice questions are designed so that the answers are not given. Anecdotal evidence suggests that where an answer sheet is available, students simply print it off and use it for rote learning, or in some cases, simply read it through. This can only result in shallow learning, as they do not go through the process of reasoning and reflection on their answers, which is required to facilitate deep learning. Instead of simply giving the answers, detailed feedback is automatically given to show the student why his response is wrong (and why it is right!) and where to look for the right answer in the case of an incorrect response. If multiple choice questions are correctly drafted, they are not a ‘soft option’, but require analysis and reflective consideration from the student in order to get them right. The author is currently conducting research with Oxford Brookes University on the efficacy of this approach.

Multiple choice questions are now widely used as preparation, for follow-up, and as formative assessment for the professional conduct and financial services module of the Legal Practice Course (“PCFSMA”). PCFSMA is assessed by means of pervasive questions in the compulsory modules of the course and by means of a discrete assessment consisting entirely of multiple choice questions. To assist students with this module, they are given a bank of multiple choice questions, plus an interactive mock assessment which is marked by the system and which can be done to time. In order to

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ensure that simply guessing the answers is not rewarded, while each correct answer receives one mark, each incorrect answer receives a penalty of one-third of a mark. Again, Moodle can be set up to do this automatically. The questions all provide immediate feedback to the students and useful data for the tutor, so that targeted support and reminders to carry out the formative assessment can be issued timeously.

Online marking, web and podcasts

Online marking was trialled by the author in the private acquisitions module of the course in 2005/06. Students submitted a typed piece of work online and tutors had the option of either grading and putting comments online into a grading space in the VLE, or printing off the assignments and marking them manually. The major advantage of this method was that there was a central, electronic record of submitted assignments, which could be verified in the event of a dispute.

More ambitious projects have also been trialled as part of the ongoing IT integration project. Webcasting was tried as part of the PCFSMA, with traditional lectures being replaced entirely by webcasts and multiple choice question banks for two academic years.

The webcast screen showed the tutor, plus navigational tools, PowerPoint slides and headings and key points to help with note-taking. Feedback was mixed, with most students finding the flexibility of the resource useful (they could access remotely and as many times as they wished), but many saying that they would like to have a traditional lecture as well as, or instead of, the webcasts. Students appeared to feel that the social element of the lecture was important and that they engaged more effectively with a 'live' lecture than with a webcast.

Podcasting was rather better received. Oxilp's podcasts are audio only and are saved in the VLE as MP3 files. To date they have been recorded as a supplement to lectures. For part-time students from 2007, they will be used as a substitute for lectures, so that all face to face contact time is student-led and activity based. The access problems that some students experienced with the webcasts (caused mainly by large file sizes and slow downloads) and the need for the most recent

versions of some Microsoft software required to play the webcasts were not present with the podcasts. File sizes are small and the files can be downloaded onto portable devices, such as MP3 players or mobile phones. They were popular with students as supplements to lectures and for revision, but those who commented said that they did not want podcasts as a substitute for lectures.

E-portfolios

The author has also conducted research into the use of e-portfolios which plug in to Moodle in legal education. The project was funded by JISC and the author conducted the work in conjunction with Dr John Phelps from Goldsmiths College and Oxilp's IT systems manager, Sean Keogh. Slides with more detail of the project are available from http://vmap.gold.ac.uk/vmap_initial.ppt and from the JISC website www.jisc.ac.uk. The author is currently involved in further research into the use of e-portfolios in the professional stage of legal training, in conjunction with the UK Centre for Legal Education in Warwick. It is intended to pilot the use of e-portfolios into the existing Legal Practice Course. This second project is, however, at an early stage.

Conclusion

However the integration process runs in terms of timescale (shorter courses may truncate the author's full academic year timescale), the most important issue is that of keeping staff engaged with the process of integration. Ensuring that they feel confident and supported throughout the entire cycle will be far more effective than imposing change without involving them. Training and consultation ensure that staff understand what they are trying to accomplish and ensure that they can do more for themselves rather than depending on a third party. This will do more to keep them engaged and motivated than having someone outside their course, who does not necessarily understand the way the subject fits together, dictating the process. If tutors are motivated and engaged, then the process of change will run more smoothly and will ultimately produce a better result for all concerned.

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Moodle support and consultancy

<http://www.howtomoodle.com>

Moodle training

<http://moodlemoot.org>

Moodle conference

Biography

Liz Polding is a Principal Lecturer at the Oxford Institute of Legal Practice.

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Bridging the Gap: the Information Skills Training Partnership at Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract: This paper by Nicola Wakefield was presented at the BIALL 2006 Conference in Brighton. The presentation discussed the formation of a working partnership between the School of Law Staff and the Law Library at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). The two parties have worked together successfully for many years to embed legal information skills training into all law teaching programmes. The paper looks at how collaboration occurred, what training materials have been developed, working methods, and the reasons for the project's success.

Keywords: e-learning; law schools; academic law libraries; project management; legal information skills training; training materials

Introduction

MMU School of Law runs a number of information skills training projects. Each law course taught at the University, at every level from first year undergraduate

to the Bar Vocational Course (BVC), includes an element of legal information skills training, embedded as part of its teaching programme.

Collaboration between the School of Law and the law librarian to deliver effective information skills training began in 1998. The librarian at this time was struggling to