

Business Tutors' Perceptions of a Virtual Learning Environment

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Rationale for Project

There has been an increasing growth in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in which the Government and educational institutions have invested vast amounts. Whilst the benefits of integrating ICT with traditional teaching are widely recognised in the literature, there is limited research into how teachers/tutors are actually using this resource in the teaching-learning environment. The majority of existing research focuses on the use of ICT within the commercial sector or primary/secondary schools. The purpose of the current study was therefore to explore higher education tutors' use and perceptions of, in particular, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Aims of Project

The project aimed to elicit:

- tutors' use of the VLE;
- how tutors' integrate the VLE with other teaching materials and methods of delivery;
- tutors' perceptions of the VLE;
- tutors' perceptions of students' use of the VLE;
- tutors' perceptions of the impact of the VLE on the teaching-learning environment;
- tutors' perceptions of the impact of the VLE on student engagement and attendance.

Methodology and Method

A case-study was undertaken during the academic year 2006/2007 at a UK business school that adopts the commercially provided VLE, BlackBoard. Although it is the University's intention that face-to-face contact should form the core of learning activities, it is envisaged that students will benefit from the value added by the supplementary online provision. All undergraduate modules are delivered online in line with minimum specifications relating to course content, which whilst helpful in promoting consistency, are not overly prescriptive or prohibitive.

The data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with level 1 module leaders across the business school. Although the researchers developed an interview guide that highlighted the main issues to be covered, specific questions evolved as each interviewed progressed. This allowed the researchers and the interviewees the opportunity to probe for details and discuss points of particular interest to them. The emphasis of the interviews was on what the interviewees viewed as important in explaining and understanding their use and perceptions of BlackBoard. Interviewees were not discouraged from going off on tangents as these

gave insight into what they saw as relevant. An inductive approach was therefore adopted and the data were analysed from a phenomenographic perspective.

Results

Use of VLE

In general, tutors' use of BlackBoard is relatively static. The majority of tutors use BlackBoard to aid with mundane administrative and course management functions and to deposit or 'file' information related to taught sessions. Such limited use of BlackBoard has resulted in the VLE mirroring the physical environment. Tutors did not view BlackBoard as a learning environment but rather as a means of disseminating information. This resulted in fear among tutors that students confuse the provision of information with learning. Nonetheless, tutors recognised that if used differently, BlackBoard can potentially enhance learning by providing additional resources and/or accommodate different learning styles. Although tutors could see the benefit of using BlackBoard to develop a community among block release or distance learning students, they recognised that they would need to develop and restructure their online material immensely if the institution were to adopt an 'open university' approach to teaching.

Tutors' use of BlackBoard is influenced by their perceptions of: level of study, cohort size, diversity of student population, level of student engagement, impact on attendance and engagement, impact on tutor creativity, importance of face-to-face interaction, impact on role or tutor, staff development, and time and resources.

Level of Study

Tutors' believe that their use of BlackBoard should vary across levels of study. It is argued that more guidance is required at Level 1, whereas additional resources should be provided at Level 3 to encourage students to become independent learners.

Cohort Size

BlackBoard is perceived as beneficial for managing modules with high student numbers. However, it is acknowledged that its interactive features work better with smaller groups.

Diversity of Student Population

Tutors recognised that given the increasingly diverse student cohort, online provision offers flexible access to information.

Level of Student Engagement

Tutors highlighted the assessment driven nature of undergraduate students, commenting upon the fact that students do not engage with the interactive functions of BlackBoard unless the content is assessment related. However, some recognised that the level of tutor engagement will inevitably impact upon student behaviour.

Impact on Attendance and Engagement

Many tutors believe that the provision of material online has impacted negatively on student attendance at taught sessions. This is of concern to some tutors because of the underlying assumption that there is a direct relationship between attendance and engagement. In order to counteract BlackBoard's perceived impact on attendance, some tutors have reduced their online content provision, whilst others have begun to rethink their approach to taught sessions. Further, providing students with material in

advance of taught sessions raised concerns about student engagement in the classroom.

Impact on Creativity

Some tutors believed that the provision of online material in advance of taught sessions was restrictive, standardising delivery and inhibiting creativity.

Importance of Face-to-Face Interaction

Tutors argued that students like the face-to-face interaction facilitated by classroom teaching, rather than the impersonal nature of BlackBoard, and stressed its importance in developing students' key skills.

Impact on Role of Tutor

All tutors recognised that the increasing use of ICT will change their role in the future. Some saw this as a positive, recognising that Blackboard has the potential to supplement and compliment their teaching practice, whilst others feared that it could replace them.

Staff Development

Although tutors acknowledged that their degree of IT literacy impacts upon their level of engagement with BlackBoard, nobody wanted any further training in how to manage BlackBoard. Instead tutors wanted the Institution to develop a coherent online strategy and to encourage tutors to network to facilitate the sharing of ideas and best practice.

Time and Resources

Most tutors appeared unwilling to devote much time to BlackBoard in view of their teaching, administration and research commitments.

To conclude, irrespective of the above findings, most tutors expect to continue down the 'virtual' route due to pressure from both students and management to accommodate technological changes.

Project Outputs and Resource

In general, most tutors perceived BlackBoard as an electronic filing cabinet, a valuable tool for course management, enhanced communication and the dissemination of information. However, in support of Lindsay (2006) and Livingston and Condie (2006), few embedded the VLE into their teaching and learning strategy. It is therefore argued that tutors' use of BlackBoard is somewhat limited and static, with online provisions mirroring hard copies used in taught sessions. Tutors argued that Level 1 students require a limited amount of very specific information, whereas higher level students should be provided with additional resources that enable them to learn independently. More generally, tutors commented upon the lack of student engagement with the interactive functions to explain their own use of BlackBoard. In support of Love and Fry (2006), the lack of student engagement is linked to the assessment driven nature of undergraduate students, but perhaps more alarmingly, lack of tutor engagement. However, Lindsay (2006) argued that students do interact but prefer to use other social communication networks.

Further tutors feared that the provision of information outside the classroom has a negative impact on attendance. As a result, tutors have developed two distinct strategies to add value or to incentivise attendance at taught sessions. Some tutors do not provide complete lecture slides online, whilst others develop discussions that go beyond the content of lecture slides. Both strategies highlight the underlying

assumption that there is a relationship between attendance, engagement and achievement and how as a result, BlackBoard has influenced tutor behaviour. The need to add value to encourage attendance is further exacerbated by tutors' perceptions that BlackBoard allows students to employ a '*smash and grab*' philosophy. Arguably, some students believe that downloading information acts as a satisfactory substitute for attendance. Whilst tutors agree that ICT can be used to disseminate information (Livingston and Condie, 2006), they do not believe that this constitutes 'real learning' and do not therefore perceive BlackBoard as a learning environment (Lindsay, 2006). However, in support of Livingston and Condie (2006), some tutors did recognise that BlackBoard has the potential to accommodate different learning styles.

In support of Lindsay (2006), tutors defended the importance of face-to-face interaction, either between tutor and student or student and student, as students benefit from the opportunity to learn from the tutor and each other. Tutors' support of face-to-face interaction is founded on the belief that it enhances key skills, including note taking, presentation, listening, communication, logical thinking and team skills. Tutors argued that students enjoy personal interaction, ignoring the possibility that some may favour the more impersonal approach to learning facilitated by BlackBoard.

Nonetheless, tutors recognised that the requirement to provide information online can act as a '*security blanket*' for students, staff and the institution. Both staff and management feel comforted by the fact that they have provided students with information that they can access 24/7. However as this information is provided in advance, tutors argued that it restricts creativity and spawns a more standardised approach to teaching. Tutors also argued that the information provided online to support classroom teaching would need to be revised if it were to be used for distance learning. Tutors acknowledged that there is a continuum along which teaching and learning strategies can develop and that the institution needs to decide upon an online strategy.

Given the need to accommodate the technological changes that are taking place in the external environment (Weiss, 1995), tutors accepted that the increasing use of ICT is inevitable and that the role of the tutor will change in the future. However, the extent to which tutors accept the need to and are willing to change varies. Tutors who believed that learning can only take place in the classroom feared the increasing use of ICT and the resulting loss of student contact and control of the learning environment. This fear was exacerbated by the underlying belief that the Government and institutions are investing in ICT to improve the efficiency of delivery rather than the quality of learning. There were concerns that this could result in the commodification of education, which would undermine their role as the source of knowledge and erode their intellectual property; the ultimate outcome being redundancy. This finding supports Livingston and Condie (2006) who claimed that tutors' lack of engagement with ICT can be partly explained by their reluctance to relinquish their role as the expert transmitter of knowledge. Furthermore, Weiss (1995) argued that teachers have a self interest in maintaining the status quo.

Other tutors were more positive about the possibility of a change in role, recognising that there are some things that BlackBoard has the potential to do well and that it should supplement and compliment, rather than replace, traditional classroom teaching to accommodate different learning styles. However, given the isolated nature of their role, tutors called for the sharing of ideas and *best practice* if BlackBoard is to be successfully integrated into the teaching-learning environment. This finding supports Simpson, Payne and Condie (2005) who recognised that as

teachers experience a high level of autonomy in the decision making process, adoption of ICT relies heavily on their personal skills, inclinations and enthusiasms, and that intra and inter discipline and faculty communication is at best fragmented and haphazard. The current findings suggest that tutors do not want to be told what to do, but would like the opportunity to network to discuss ideas that could be applied to their module. Indeed, the fact that tutors argued that the VLE does not allow students either to discuss or to apply theoretical frameworks, highlights the lack of understanding of how the VLE may be used to support classroom teaching across disciplines. Nonetheless time is scarce and HE tutors have to juggle teaching, administration and research (Lindsay, 2006). Unfortunately, the current findings suggest that excellence in teaching is not prioritised by the institutional culture.

Conclusions

The above discussion highlights the current limited use of BlackBoard as an electronic filing cabinet that replicates what is delivered in hard copy. At present, tutors stress the relationship between attendance, engagement and achievement and BlackBoard is not perceived as a learning environment. However, the literature supports the need for tutors to be more innovative in their use of ICT to enhance the teaching-learning environment. BlackBoard should not be an “*add on, a bolt on*”, but should be integrated into the teaching-learning environment. As part of this process, tutors’ use of BlackBoard needs to evolve and become more creative and interactive. However, tutors must ensure that they constructively align their use of BlackBoard and their teaching practice to make best use of the opportunities presented by both elements. For example, tutors could develop safe spaces where students can interact, practice questions and get feedback, without having to put their hand up in class; this would enable self-assessment and reflection to take place in a non-judgemental environment. Using BlackBoard in this fashion would encourage students to take control of their learning and empower them to construct their own knowledge with the guidance of their tutor.

However, the authors argue that if tutors are to engage proactively with BlackBoard, the following changes need to be made. At the institutional level, there is the need for a clear strategy that outlines how BlackBoard is to be incorporated into the teaching-learning environment. However, this should not be too prescriptive to allow tutors to discover what works for their own module. Tutors need to be supported and resourced; the provision of time and staff development is critical. The institution needs to foster communities of practice that enable staff to network and share ideas, so that tutors are more aware of the potential uses of BlackBoard. Finally, if tutors are to be encouraged to engage, there is the need to address the fear of replacement. Tutors need to be reassured that rather than replacing face-to-face interaction, BlackBoard is a supplementary tool that has the potential to support traditional classroom teaching. To conclude, if the institution can encourage tutors to engage with BlackBoard, it at least has some hope of engaging students.

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