



Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

Vol. 1, No. 2.

ISSN: 1473-8376

[www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste](http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste)

PRACTICE PAPER

## Observations on a Year of Using the Wolverhampton On-Line Learning Framework (WOLF)

Ross Hall ([rjhall@glam.ac.uk](mailto:rjhall@glam.ac.uk))

University of Glamorgan

Llantwit Road, Pontypridd, CF37 1TR, UK.

DOI:10.3794/johlste.12.29

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### Abstract

This practice paper aims to further discussions initiated by Batey (2002) and comment on observations of good practice, using an Information Technology (IT) centred learning package, the Wolverhampton On-Line Learning Framework (WOLF). It will outline potential ways of improving and promoting staff and student usage, whilst providing an overview of the benefits of using IT to support learning. WOLF has been shown to be successful for staff and students to the point that students expect all modules to be supported by WOLF. IT-supported systems like WOLF should continue to provide additional learning resources for staff and students, as long as both bodies embrace such advancements in Information Technology. To encourage usage of WOLF at the beginning of a module or unit of study, the practice of showing students what information can be found and importantly, ensuring that students have the skills needed to use the system are essential. Following this, providing students with ongoing support and encouragement, for instance by suggesting that there is useful information to be found on WOLF, appears to be instrumental in its uptake, for both staff and students alike. WOLF could also be used to identify students that do not use IT and as such, may provide personal tutors with valuable information on tutees. Such systems have been found to be invaluable in the provision of graduate packages to outside agencies. Similarly, these may also be used to generate income from external sources, via university accredited short courses, if students were using WOLF from the start of each module.

**Keywords:** computer-assisted learning, student support

### Introduction

The University of Wolverhampton (UoW) designed and implemented an online learning framework to support student learning, this being known as the Wolverhampton On-Line Learning Framework (WOLF). Having undergone much refinement since its introduction, WOLF provides a platform for

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*At the time of conducting the study, Ross Hall was lecturing in sport and exercise psychology at the University of Wolverhampton, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Ross has since gained employment at the University of Glamorgan, also lecturing in sport psychology. Ross believes that learning resources such as WOLF can provide additional support mechanisms to assist students in achieving their academic ambitions, whilst providing tutors with valuable, objective module-related data on their tutees.*

lecturers to develop Information Technology (IT) supported learning, in addition to traditional delivery methods (i.e., lectures, seminars etc.). Access can be gained remotely or via computers within the university. Module-related information is displayed within subject specific areas and links to other sites of interest can also be provided. It has many differing functions, which will be discussed at relevant points throughout this paper.

When the author joined the lecturing staff at UoW, WOLF usage was in its infancy and whilst there were no modules actively using WOLF, some were under development. Staff within the Department of Sport began to explore its potential and disseminate findings to others, in the form of workshops, discussions groups and more traditional, guided 'hands-on' trial and error. Dearing (1997) suggested that staff could be resistant to the integration of learning technology into higher education institutions. Such resistance has been previously suggested to be due to factors such as a lack of time and poor support mechanisms (Jackson et al., 1999; Batey, 2002). Whilst this may have been the case at its conception, a number of staff have been instrumental in encouraging others to use IT-supported learning, e.g., by developing material suitable for IT-supported learning and showing other lecturers how to use it. Lecturers tend to place a great deal of importance on encouraging students to become autonomous learners, the latter being a requirement of 'graduateness' - a shared or generic set of attributes that all graduates should possess upon degree completion (interested readers are referred to HEQC (1995) for a discussion on graduateness). Therefore, it is suggested that lecturers should lead the way and be proactive learners themselves.

Providing electronic resources neither empowers the academic pedagogically nor constitutes learning for students (Simpson, 2001). Creating a learning resource that may assist student learning could be fruitless, unless staff encourage student usage. Additionally, Batey (2002) outlined the challenge presented to lecturers when attempting to inspire the use of IT-supported learning. Batey (2002) suggested that this represented a 'cultural change', something the author felt was difficult to achieve. This paper will outline WOLF usage at UoW and its relative success as an additional learning resource. In doing so, two Level One undergraduate modules, one supported by WOLF, the other not, will be used to highlight student and staff perceptions of the system. Therefore, this article will identify the benefits of WOLF for both students and lecturers alike and comment on good practice.

## **WOLF-based resources**

Early in 2001, the Department of Sport had only a small number of undergraduate and postgraduate WOLF modules under development. Out of a total of 11 WOLF-supported modules, seven were sport and exercise psychology related. Over the following year this number increased substantially and by September 2002 WOLF had 26 modules 'live' within the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure (SSPAL) alone, with several hundred university-wide. WOLF has a vast array of functions, enabling lecturers to post notes, entire lectures and module-related information; or provide links to other sites or interactive functions such as discussion groups, noticeboard information and time-phased tests. Student access to these is either at UoW or remotely, from home.

Providing such resources does not replace lectures, but is used to provide background material for students who may find it difficult to attend, due to work or family commitments, possibly helping to widen participation. If however, some students do not attend, but gain resources from WOLF and are still able to gain marks within their overall profile, surely this would provide evidence of independent learning occurring. All individuals are suggested to have preferred learning styles (Kolb, 1984) and it is proposed that lecturers tend to teach in accordance to their own preferred style of learning. WOLF may therefore enable those who do not learn effectively via traditional methods (or delivery styles) the freedom of choice. However, it is unlikely that WOLF could provide 'something for everyone'. Consequently, attempts should be made to provide mechanisms that allow all students to learn in their preferred style. This may result in better marks for such students.

WOLF therefore provides lecture material in a similar way to traditional lectures, whilst also allowing flexibility to some students. There are also a number of interactive tasks that can be generated by

lecturers to assist the learning process. For example, multiple-choice questions can be displayed for set periods of time, which can give students instant feedback on their test performance, thus allowing students to identify correct responses and keep attempting the test until all correct answers are found. IT-supported learning such as WOLF should not be seen to replace traditional delivery methods, but to provide a more supportive learning environment for students. Being able to read notes prior to lectures could potentially make lectures a discussion of pertinent issues; thus not replacing, but complementing current lecture procedures.

## **Promoting use of WOLF**

At the beginning of each sport and exercise psychology module, a structured session on WOLF, its uses, benefits and tools within, is delivered. Students are taken through simple procedures, such as gaining access to module guides, undertaking multiple-choice tests, contacting staff and printing lectures in handout format. Also at this time, students register on the module with their preferred e-mail addresses, giving lecturers instant access to those registered via e-mail. Using e-mail, students are encouraged to ask questions from within WOLF, so that when tutors respond all those registered will receive the answers. This is of benefit to the lecturer as it prevents repetition and equally, to the students, as those who prefer not to ask also learn from others. This sharing of information is essential, although it has taken some time for students to appreciate its value. In addition to these sessions, the first few lectures have been taught from within WOLF, as certain lecture theatres have Internet access. This process familiarises students with procedures required and facilitates its use amongst the student body. Desensitisation may help those who would otherwise not benefit from its use.

Showing students how to use WOLF (via structured sessions and teaching from within WOLF) could be the difference between initiating required behaviours and avoidance. Its use is also continually encouraged throughout lectures and seminars. Information gathered during seminars or practical sessions can be placed on WOLF and accessed easily by all, that same day. Subsequently, the following session begins with accessing such information. Additionally, this information may need to be copied from one format to another for analysis (e.g., from MS Word into MS Excel or a statistical package). It could be argued therefore, that this approach may be more effective than that used by Batey (2002), as there appears to be a relationship between how much lecturers emphasise using WOLF and student usage. This constant emphasis on and encouragement of WOLF usage, and repeatedly showing others how to use it, could be a better approach than simply telling them where the information can be found. Sessions, both group and individual should be implemented in an attempt to promote usage of the system. Demonstrations and constant encouragement appear to be vital if students and staff are to actively partake in using or developing such resources.

## **Advantages of using WOLF for lecturers**

WOLF provides information on student usage and as such they can be 'tracked'. Student tracking enables module tutors to discover how many times each student has accessed each of the sub-groups within the module, along with the number of times observed. WOLF also gives lecturers information on how much of the module information has been accessed, as a percentage. As such, when debriefing students on module grades for each piece of coursework, this information can be used to highlight areas of improvement for students with respect to areas researched and/or ignored. Additionally, personal tutors might use this to monitor tutees usage, thus enabling tutors to be proactive in helping students to overcome fears they may have about IT. Identifying such issues early could help in retaining students who find the transition from school or college to university difficult. This is a potential factor to be used as part of a multi-modal intervention strategy, designed to provide students with personally relevant support and guidance.

## **Module feedback**

Student feedback has been both positive and negative, although generally positive. When completing module feedback, students have been asked about best and worst points regarding the module.

Typically, good things about WOLF-supported modules have included: 'all information available on WOLF'; 'regular emails from staff regarding updated information'; 'lecture notes available on WOLF'; and 'handouts available online'. There were only two comments relating to negative WOLF-related issues: a need for 'better information on WOLF' and 'more tests' wanted online. These, it could be argued, are actually in favour of such supportive learning resources. Conversely, feedback from a module unsupported by WOLF has included: 'module information should be on WOLF, as all other modules are'; 'more information available on WOLF' and 'why isn't the information available on WOLF?'. Evidently students feel particularly aggrieved when WOLF is available for some modules but not others.

Of particular interest, is that students tend to expect all modules to be 'live' on WOLF and this expectation is generated fairly soon after modules commence. Such feedback can also have the desired effect of encouraging staff to develop their modules and place such information on WOLF, possibly assisting the advancement of such resources. However, it may be pertinent to add here that this could alienate those members of staff who do not perceive themselves to be competent users of IT. In addition, new members of staff who are unfamiliar with such learning environments may also become alienated, if not fully supported. As students' expectations increase, such staff would require extra support. As was previously highlighted by Batey (2002), staff may not be fully supportive of such changes, but it should be identified that the personal effort required for cultural change could potentially be repaid (with interest), when applied to systems such as WOLF.

## **Module-related performance**

Students' grades do not appear to have a direct relationship with WOLF usage. That is, the percentage of module information accessed by students did not significantly correlate with final module marks ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). This is, of course, not surprising as some students attempt to 'play the game', aware that lecturers regularly check who has been accessing related information. However, access rates (amount of information read and how many times) and test performance (e.g., interactive tasks, such as multiple-choice) can be monitored. In this manner it may be possible to get objective feedback on whether students have used module related information contained within WOLF.

Of those receiving higher module marks (2:1 classification and above), some have high percentage usage, whilst others have low or no access to WOLF module resources. Equally, those below 2:1 classification also have high and low access rates. However, if students require additional information, it is freely available on-line. This could be essential in freeing up lecturers' tutorial time for those students who prefer personal contact and guidance. Interestingly, of those students receiving the lowest module marks (3<sup>rd</sup> class and below), just under half (48 per cent) either have not registered or did not access module-related information using WOLF. When considered with the previous non-significant correlation, this suggests that students who do not access information tend to perform poorly, but students who do well access WOLF with varying amounts, hence a possible reason why no significant correlation was found.

In addition and as a personal tutor, it was alarming to identify that some students (whose profiles were consistently within 3<sup>rd</sup> class grades) had not registered for other modules on WOLF. This information may go some way to identifying those more likely to postpone or drop out of undergraduate study, especially if noted in the first semester of their course. Whilst a subjective viewpoint and without evidence to support, such mechanisms may help to improve attrition rates university-wide, as part of an intervention strategy aimed at retaining students. Identifying why these students are not using IT and helping them through their fears may be beneficial in preventing attrition and help transfer of knowledge across subject areas.

## **Alternative styles of module delivery**

WOLF has played a pivotal role with some learning packages provided by SSPAL to the Armed Services. Currently RAF Physical Training Instructors (RAF PTIs) gain access to undergraduate degree opportunities within SSPAL. RAF PTIs are given credit for approved prior and experiential

learning, based on courses and employment undertaken within the RAF. RAF PTIs meet with lecturers a number of times throughout the semester (usually beginning and middle), via designated contact days and arranged tutorials. WOLF has been an invaluable supplementary resource to these individuals, not only for lecture material but also in the use of email discussion groups. This project has had moderate success, with six RAF PTIs having graduated to date. In addition, UoW is currently in discussion with the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, who are looking to utilise a similar model for their PTIs' professional development. Similar schemes could also be offered to other health care and fitness-related professionals, nationwide on specified degree pathways. Alternatively, such programmes could also be used to provide university accredited short courses within the sport, leisure and tourism industries.

Such alternative delivery methods have the potential to provide extra support to existing and future students, widen participation and generate valuable external income. However, due to logistical issues (e.g. travel and work), such learners may not benefit from the initial guided usage on WOLF that part and full-time students have. As such, it may be necessary to adapt initial contact to suit the client group. Staff may need to visit clients 'in the field' (partner colleges, service personnel etc.) and adjust delivery methods accordingly. In this manner, the process of remote access can be demonstrated and seen by all. Those attending could then share this information with those who did not attend. Consequently, there would need to be an adjustment of set-up costs, depending on client group and initial delivery methods. Subsequent monitoring of students would then become vital in order to ensure that all were accessing module related information from WOLF.

## **Conclusion**

The past year has seen rapid growth in the amount of modules available online via the WOLF system at UoW. Student and staff usage continues to increase and its major benefit is additional support for module-related issues. However, this paper has covered just a small part of what the system offers to both staff and students alike. Systems such as WOLF may be beneficial in supporting learning and teaching, although remote access does require a PC and Internet access. It also provides some valuable information that may identify those students who are more likely to leave undergraduate study and form the basis of a university intervention strategy, aimed at student retention. The continual process of showing both staff and students how to use WOLF and its potential benefits may be the difference between avoidance and usage. Specifically, WOLF enables efficient and effective supported learning, which could be used to generate income for higher education institutions from accredited short courses and both undergraduate and postgraduate degree schemes. Importantly, just because such a system is created, this is no indication that it will prove to be successful. Staff and students alike must endeavour with its applications and ensure its continuing success.

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