Masters in e-Learning

Supporting Classroom Teaching

The new WebLearn service at Oxford offers improved support for teaching, learning, with features that enable asynchronous communication, collaboration and assessment.

"As a support for groupwork and enquiry based learning, WebLearn gives me the tools I need."

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Melissa Highton uses WebLearn to support my classroom teaching by providing media-rich resources and online tasks to be done before and after class sessions. Melissa is part of a small team which jointly designs and teaches this Masters course in the Department of Education.

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is used in several ways:

- to provide consistency in supporting students by preparing and posting handouts and study materials in the **resources** area;
- to see an overview of colleagues' teaching so that we can ensure that the materials we cover in our individual lectures is linked and coherent as a course of study;
- to make clear to students what the learning aims and outcomes of sessions are;
- to host media (audio and video materials);
- to support discussion and enquiry outside class time through the discussion **forums** and group work in the **wiki**.

Modelling good practice

Across the Masters course WebLearn is used in particular, to model the way in which VLEs can be used by teachers. This is an important element of the use of technology in this particular course, since the students enrolled are learning to be teachers, educators and professional learning technologists.

The contact sessions are designed to include activities which are authentic and relevant to the work environment in which the future graduates will build their careers. Clear links are drawn between the class activities and professional practice. Activities are structured as enquiry- and resource-based learning.

This session will focus on the use of VLEs for teaching in UK higher education.

- Why do institutions provide virtual learning environments?
- What benefits or challenges do they bring?
- What skills do higher education tutors need to make effective use of a virtual learning environment? Where do they get these skills?
- What potential is offered for new pedagogies or do we simply replicate old ones?

Pre- session:

Please watch this video recording of the 'The VLE is dead' debate at the recent Association of Learning Technologists conference (ALT-C). If the player is not working for you here a quick 'VLE is dead' Google search will get you to the same content. As you watch the debate, make notes as though you are a journalist reporting the event. I will ask you in class which you think the most compelling arguments made were.

http://elearningstuff.wordpress.com/2009/09/09/the-vle-is-dead-the-movie/

Using real—life scenarios

Starting with a scenario under my guidance, students draw on their previous experience and learned theory to identify their own issues and questions. They then examine the resources they need to research the topic, thereby acquiring the requisite knowledge and synthesising that into a group presentation by the end of the session. The presentations are then posted back into WebLearn and a follow-up task is given. Knowledge gained in this way is more likely to be retained because it has been acquired by experience and in relation to a real problem. The enquiry-based tasks usually last around 2 hours.

Opportunity offered by the VLE

The online tasks before and after classes ensure that students are ready with relevant background information before they begin, and that their learning is consolidated after the session.

Educational benefits

It is easy to set up a group task in WebLearn, to be done in advance of the session, which avoids having to gather students together or email them the required materials. Students can easily obtain their required resources and guidance in their WebLearn site via the **internal groups** feature. Melissa can see from their submissions what they are thinking about the subject before meeting them in class, and this allows maximum contact time to spend on group activities which take advantage of meeting face-to-face.
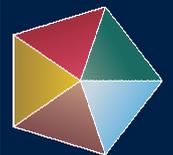
Tips

1. Students would like to be able to edit their own discussion postings for typos and extraneous HTML code that might have been inadvertently copied across form MS Word. If students need to be able to edit and/or delete their own postings, be sure to set the permissions accordingly in the Topic Settings for the **Forum** discussion.

2. It is easy to embed a relevant video for students to watch, if you find such a resource on YouTube or Oxford podcasts (http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk). This is how to do it:

    Go and find the video that you wish to use. If it is a YouTube video that can be legally re-used in this way, the YouTube website will provide a piece of "embed" code that you need to copy. It looks something like this: <embed type="application/x-shockwave-flash" src="http://www.youtube.com/v/……………"></embed>. Simply paste this code into the HTML Source view of a page in WebLearn, and the video will display with its associated controls.

    (Note: You can also link directly to a YouTube video which will avoid 'mixed content' warnings in Internet Explorer.)

3. WebLearn questions and answers are provided on the WebLearn Guidance site (weblearn.ox.ac.uk/info — click on **Site owners' FAQ**)

Conclusion

"We have found WebLearn to be useful in supporting colleagues who teach in teams, as well as external practitioners who contribute just a few sessions to a broader programme. Being able to see the materials your colleagues have made available and the discussions the students are having online helps me to prepare my own materials."

Melissa Highton and Jill Fresen, March 2010

http://weblearn.ox.ac.uk