A guide for learning developers and learning support staff

Scope

- The Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme funded a total of ten projects from 2005 to 2009, to explore learners' perceptions of and participation in technology-enhanced learning in a digital age

- Earlier research addressed learners' experiences of single modules, technologies or curriculum interventions; the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme covered the holistic nature of learners' experiences of learning, with a focus on learners' own words

- The projects piloted a range of innovative methodologies and techniques for eliciting the learner voice

- Nearly 3,500 learners responded to surveys, and around 260 were involved in a sustained way

Audience

This guidance is designed for:

- Learning development staff

- Learning support staff

- Library and learning resources staff

- IT services staff

What have we learnt?

Conceptions of learning and study habits

Past experiences with technology and with learning have a profound influence over learners' preferred strategies for study. Learners' conceptions of learning, their self-efficacy as learners and technology users, along with the expectations communicated by tutors, are more significant than learners' ages (the supposed 'Google generation' effect) or their access to technology. Novice learners are, on the whole, conservative in their study habits. Only a small minority actively explore the potential of technologies to support their learning, even if they are proficient with digital networks and devices.

To work with learners' different conceptions of learning and study, learning support staff can consider:

- Eliciting information about learners' habits, including the technologies they use

- Designing interventions that will assist learners change their practice over time, ideally working with curriculum staff to achieve this

- Thinking about where technology can reduce barriers to learning, such as difficulty with physical access and problems of fitting learning into a busy life

This guide forms part of *Responding to Learners*, a synthesis of outcomes of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme. For further information on the other guides in this series, the projects and their findings, and downloadable resources for practitioners, researchers and managers, visit: **https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2**

- Being aware that while many learners use technology to multi-task, some find social networks and websites a distraction – and suggesting a range of strategies for learners to achieve depth as well as breadth of attention

ICT and information skills

Despite their familiarity with personal technologies, learners often lack skills in using technology to help them learn. Timely ICT support – when learners are actually engaged in academic tasks – is essential.

Almost all learners overestimate their ability to find and evaluate information online. Google searching is learners' first recourse, and learners continue to prefer sites like Wikipedia over academic resources, even after some time at college or university. However, the experience of study does lead to development in the use of online journals and academic search engines. Some learners become highly proficient at accessing resources such as podcasts, slides, videos and course materials from other institutions.

There is a growing body of evidence that ICT and information skills are better retained if they are fully integrated into programmes of study where learners can see their relevance and have opportunities to practise new skills in context.

To promote development of learners' ICT and information skills, learning support staff can consider:

- Offering ongoing training opportunities, ideally with individual progress review, rather than relying on one-off induction sessions

- Thinking about how bite-sized online resources can offer just-in-time training while learners are engaged with study tasks – without expecting these to replace individual guidance

- Offering training in evaluating the value of resources from other institutions

- Thinking about the role that student helpers, ambassadors and mentors could play

- Designing tasks that require learners to deal critically with online information and with information in different media

- Working with subject staff to integrate provision into modules tailored to specific needs

Digital literacies for learning and for life

Beyond ICT and information skills, this JISC-funded research for the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme reveals that successful learners require a complex range of digital capabilities. These capabilities include communicating in different media, collaboration, self-organisation and self-presentation, managing identities, critical reading and creative expression in different media, navigating virtual spaces/worlds, coping with distractions and digital overload, staying safe, choosing appropriate blends of technology, and managing public–private boundaries in online social spaces. There is little evidence that learners' private practices are providing them with these capabilities.

To promote learners' wider digital literacies, learning support staff can consider:

- Integrating 'digital' aspects into existing study skills support, for example critical evaluation of information in different media, academic writing in different media, and avoiding plagiarism

- Supporting the use of e-portfolios for reflection, planning and self-presentation

- Ensuring all learners have access to assistive technologies such as mind-mapping tools, voice-recognition software and personalised desktops; these are essential for learners with disabilities, but can help all learners develop personal strategies for study

'When we used the search engine for journals and such like, I really did think… yes, this is loads better than going to find a paper journal.'

Student, University of Northampton

- Establishing and nurturing online learning communities for study support, and ensuring student mentors and 'study buddies' are skilled in the use of digital technology

- Ensuring good practice in embedding digital literacy is shared: ideally, work towards an integrated strategy across departments and services

The role of peers

Peers play an important and often unacknowledged role in the learning experience. Many learners use personal technologies to elicit help from others, whether through one-to-one messages, Facebook or Google groups. This collaboration mostly occurs without the support or knowledge of tutors, although some programmes are designed to maximise the opportunities for peer support.

To encourage peer learning, learning support staff can consider:

- Establishing online social spaces in which new and pre-induction learners can support each other and get advice from more experienced learners

- Using social spaces to support workshops and encourage learners to continue sharing ideas and progress

- Offering strategies for learning that have been produced by learners themselves, for example the Lexdis database available from www.lexdis.org

- Initiating or supporting student mentor schemes and peer support processes

- Being sensitive to learners' feelings about 'their' online spaces when integrating social software into support provision

'I had to stay with my bad old habits just because I didn't feel I had time to learn something new.'

Student, University of Southampton

Learner differences

Learners are living and working in a technology-rich society, and they use technology in diverse ways to help them succeed. For some, such as learners with disabilities, access to electronic materials is essential if they are to participate in learning. Indeed, where technology has enabled learners to overcome barriers, its use is often sophisticated and agile.

However, technology can also introduce new inequalities and differences. Some learners actively prefer face-to-face interaction and paper-based media, while others lack the experience to use ICT with confidence. Some learners enjoy multi-tasking, while others find being online a distraction from study.

Acknowledging learners' different needs and preferences, learning support staff can consider:

- Helping learners to reflect on the technologies they use or could use for study

- Offering different strategies for managing learning, and encouraging learners to be aware of the potential of different media

- Offering support in different ways: one to one by email, phone and face to face; collectively in online spaces and face-to-face workshops; and, for self-study, via podcasts, online tutorials and printed materials

'I find it really helpful to go over material with other students, whether I'm organising that through IT discussions or just emailing a person I know.'

Student, University of Edinburgh

How can we embed the learner voice?

Learning support services are already very responsive to the needs of individual learners and do much to ensure that their provision adapts to meet changing demands.

Learning support staff can consider ideas such as:

- Having more experienced learners review any frameworks that are used for skills or literacies, to ensure these continue to remain relevant

- Consulting with student mentors and ambassadors, if used, about what learners really value

- Helping academic staff to evaluate their provision in the light of what is known about learners' study habits and difficulties

Responding to Learners

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