A guide for course teams

What have we learnt?

Course teams are influential

Despite a determined focus on learners' experiences beyond the curriculum, learners continue to see the curriculum as one of the defining influences on their use of technology. The decisions of course teams and curriculum designers play an essential role in shaping learners' technology use.

> *'Things like the [VLE], university email account and language learning software, they were all introduced to me by teachers and tutors. Friends would introduce things like SMS, YouTube...'*
> Student, University of Northampton

As learners mature in their studies, they become more sophisticated in their research strategies, make more extensive use of academic tools and resources, and become more agile and exploratory in their uses of technology. All these developments demand the active support of course teams and tutors.

Learners' expectations of e-learning

Our research shows that the concept that e-learning relates to the use of course-related technology is too narrow. Learners are immersed in technology and make use of whatever they have available to fit learning into their lives: in this sense, learning is potentially enabled by technology in a range of settings. However, learners lack a clear sense of how technology could support their learning.

Nor are young people all confident users of ICT. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that age is not the main factor

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:

- Course teams as they engage in reviewing, redesigning and developing the curriculum to support more effective learning experiences

- Educational and learning designers

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**

determining confidence, and that a supportive context is more significant. Even highly confident users of digital technology struggle to transfer those skills to new domains such as study. Curricula should allow learners to develop and practise relevant skills in authentic contexts, and should exploit the specific advantages that technologies offer for learning in each topic or practical domain.

Course teams can also consider:

■ Ensuring course information and learning resources are available via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – learners expect this as a minimum

■ Providing clear guidance in course documentation about the technologies learners are likely to use, both in terms of the support available and the educational benefits

■ Ensuring learners have time to become familiar with technologies before they are expected to use them for deep learning or high-stakes tasks: course teams can offer safe spaces to practise and 'play'

■ Being explicit about the digital skills and literacies learners will need to succeed (see 'Digital literacies for learning and for life')

■ Modelling 'expert' use of digital technology in the target profession, subject area or research field when designing learning tasks

■ Exploring and learning from what colleagues are doing in comparable courses, and taking advice from experts such as subject librarians, e-learning champions and ICT teams

Balance and diversity

Learners value real-world interaction as well as the flexibility of digital resources. They stress that learning with technology should be balanced with face-to-face and paper-based learning, and they recognise good teaching independently of the technologies used to support it.

Beyond this desire for balance, learners show immense diversity in their preferences for and experiences of technology. Most adopt a mix-and-match approach, for example using paper to draw mind-maps and for diary keeping, but computers for writing assignments and online research.

To respect learners' different preferences and the balance of media appropriate for different learning goals, course teams can consider:

■ Finding out what technologies learners used at earlier points in their course and, if possible, investigating what they use for private study

■ Planning to offer materials in electronic format, allowing students to customise how they read them – essential for learners with disabilities and those using assistive technologies

■ Offering more than one media option, where practical – for example podcast plus lecture notes, graphic plus text

■ Using communication technologies to give learners meaningful choices about how, when and where they engage with learning

■ Giving learners opportunities to practise tasks using different technologies – for example blog, wiki, e-portfolio and web pages – and discover their different affordances

Digital literacies for learning and for life

Beyond ICT and information skills, the Learner Experiences of e-Learning study reveals that successful learners require a complex range of digital capabilities. These skills include communicating in different media, collaboration, self-organisation, 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 all these capabilities, and there is much that formal education can add. For example, Web 2.0 tools for knowledge building (for example, wikis, peer review, social tagging), immersive environments (for example, Second Life, subject-specific simulations, interactive video) and e-portfolios are all technologies which learners rarely discover for themselves.

To help learners develop a range of digital literacies, course teams can consider:

■ Designing learning activities in which digital technologies are integral

■ Enabling or designing in the use of Web 2.0 tools, where appropriate, for learning and collaborative knowledge building

■ Enabling the use of e-portfolios to support reflection, planning and self-presentation

'Encourage those [lecturers] not using [the VLE] to see what others are doing and see if it can be helpful and useful and not such a huge change, and make it accessible.'

Student, University of Edinburgh

- Reflecting on how professional and scholarly practice is changing in response to digital opportunities, and ensuring that learners engage with these digitally enabled practices
- Establishing and nurturing online learning communities to create a feeling of group and/or professional identity
- Ensuring support is available for learners to act safely and ethically in online environments, where public and private are being redefined
- Designing in the flexibility to respond to new digital opportunities and challenges: these are changing more rapidly than most course review cycles recognise

Feedback and assessment

Learners often report negative experiences of feedback and assessment, but this is an area where use of digital technologies can lead to significant enhancements. For example, learners like recording feedback and outcomes from face-to-face sessions so they can revise their work in their own time. Learners value being able to practise assessment tasks and question types until they are confident, and they value the flexibility of choosing some aspects of how they are assessed.

When designing feedback and assessment opportunities, course teams can consider:

- Taking into account learners' different preferences for producing assessed work, for example the media they use, whether and how they engage in group work, when and how they submit evidence, and how they organise and present their work
- Ensuring the assessment regime gives due weight to technology-based practices and uses: learners may resent learning new approaches if there is no assessment pay-back
- Using technology, for example audio, automated assessment and online peer review, to provide additional feedback opportunities
- Providing learners with spaces in which to discuss assessment-related issues and share work in progress
- Valuing the creative media skills that learners may use to enhance their work

Active, authentic learning

Learners can be cynical about the use of technology as a 'crutch' to support indifferent teaching, or for 'trendy' purposes. They like to see technology introduced to their courses when:

- Technology is used in authentic activities that are relevant to their long-term learning goals, for example when the tools are those used by professionals or researchers
- They can use digital media creatively
- Technology is used to create an activity that is meaningfully different from the equivalent activity face to face or on paper, and/or is used to offer choice
- The educational rationale is clearly explained or explicitly assessed
- Technology is in the form of high quality online academic resources (for example e-journals) or research data
- Technology helps them organise themselves and their learning – for example the 'one-stop shop' VLE
- Technology helps them fit learning into their lives – for example the use of podcasts and online discussion forums

Developing a culture of innovation

Course teams should consider ways in which they can support and reward innovation – in technology use as well as in other academic matters – bearing in mind that the ability to innovate is a key attribute of 21st century graduates. Learners support programmes that make innovative uses of technology, providing they can see the educational rationale and that they gain from meeting the challenges. Course teams should look for innovative ways of designing learning, which often means leaving curricula flexible enough to respond to new ideas.

Course teams can consider:

- Involving learners in making decisions and seeking their feedback regularly (see below)

- Ensuring that assessment schemes and teaching styles value innovation, even if outcomes are less certain

- Drawing on learners' different digital skills and learning approaches as a resource

- Noting where innovations in course design are made more difficult by institutional practices such as timetabling, booking systems, and ICT and network policies, and raising issues with managers

- Making sure there is enough flexibility in programme specifications to respond to new ideas, opportunities and challenges

- Learning from what colleagues are doing and making sure innovative practice is shared across teams

How can we embed the learner voice?

Embedding the learner voice is as much about our attitudes to listening to learners as it is about improving processes. Involving learners in meaningful ways can be difficult. Learners can be reluctant to participate and may find the language of course documentation and quality assurance inaccessible. Participatory approaches have been helpful in engaging groups of learners whose voices are under-represented in design decisions, for example learners with disabilities.

Although the Learner Experiences of e-Learning projects have thrown light on many aspects of the learner experience, the challenge is to bridge the gaps between this experience and current course provision. These projects have shown that it is important to avoid generalising about digital learners, but that course teams should design flexible and responsive learning experiences which focus on developing digital literacies. The projects have also demonstrated the value of looking holistically at all aspects of the learner experience. This means bringing together teams of teachers, course designers, library, learning resources and information professionals, learning technologists and of course learners themselves, to enhance the experience across the curriculum.

Technologies and learners are diverse and changing rapidly, so it is an ongoing commitment to respond to learners' experiences with technology.

Course teams can consider:

- Working in expanded, multi-disciplinary course teams when engaging in significant course review and redesign

- Designing from the learners' point of view, such as by using storyboarding techniques and threshold concepts

- Bringing current and/or previous learners into the review process to share their experiences

- Working with Students' Union and course representatives to prepare learners for their involvement in course teams

- Using the technologies that learners have available – either personal devices or tools available in the learning environment – to capture feedback while learners are engaged with learning

- Finding out which technologies and learning opportunities learners prefer, and asking them why

- Undertaking their own investigations of the learner experience (see Guide 5 for researchers and materials on the Learner Experiences of e-Learning website for further guidance)

Responding to Learners