Role play: implications for institutions

Aim

This activity is designed to help participants consider institutional implications of findings about learners' experiences of e-learning.

Preparation

Print out each 'theme' sheet on stiff paper and cut out each element of the sheet separately, i.e. the 'theme' and the 3-4 learner roles. Put these into an envelope with the group number on the outside.

Prepare two/three powerpoint slides with the 'instructions to participants', or be prepared to talk them through.

Setting the scene

Before carrying out this activity, participants might have:
- Identified their own aims for the session
- Discussed how their own institution or department is trying to respond to learners' needs and preferences around technology
- Reviewed some of the findings from the JISC learners' experiences of e-learning projects, particularly video and audio clips of learners speaking 'in their own voice'
- Reviewed local (institutional, departmental) findings about learners' experiences of e-learning

Participants should be organised into groups of at least 4 and preferably 6-10 participants. Try to ensure that each group has at least one participant with knowledge of institutional ICT management and support.

Instructions to participants

Part 1

Several working groups have been convened to help your institution decide how it should respond to findings about learners' experiences of e-learning.

Within your working group you will have a range of different institutional roles and expertise. Please draw on your own real-life knowledge to support discussion.

Each group must nominate a committee chair to lead discussion and to report back. Each group is asked to consider one specific issue or challenge the institution is facing. Each group will also receive evidence from a number of learners

(Give out envelopes, ensuring that in each group four 'learners' receive a role. They should not read this during Part 2.)

Part 2

Begin your discussion with some general thoughts about how your *institution* might approach this challenge. Focus on ideas that can be implemented at the level of institutional strategy or central services.

Sketch out three or four ideas for responding more effectively to learners' needs and requirements

Part 3

Learners, read your instructions and get into role.

Other group members, interview the learners about your ideas and listen to their responses.

Learners, be prepared to respond in role. Try to be constructive but also honest and critical.

Part 4

Return to your 'institutional' roles and refine your suggestions in light of the evidence from the learners

Reporting back

Ask each chair to report back on their challenges and the solutions they suggest. Ask chairs and group members to offer any reflections on whether the learners' perspectives changed how they approached the challenge.

JISC

Learner A

You are a 42-year old second-year social work student studying mainly on placement in a busy social work team (three days per week) with one day per week taking classes on campus and one day studying at home. You have access to a desktop at work and to the family computer at home (you like to make sure this is available for children's homework at least some of the evening). You also have a new PDA and you are excited by the idea of using it to access learning materials, particularly as you have long bus journeys to make between home, work and the campus. You have never used a virtual learning environment but you like the idea of having course materials accessible at the times you need them.

Learner B

At the FE college where you studied for your A levels you used a Blackboard system, mainly for submitting assignments, checking announcements and catching up on notes. You like the way Blackboard helps you to organise your timetable, and it fits in well with the Office applications you use for your business studies course. But you wish tutors would be more consistent in how they use Blackboard and how they expect you to use it. You live at home and your new laptop goes everywhere with you as you travel between home and campus.

Learner C

Thanks to your course in digital arts, you are already earning money from web site design in your spare time. You've invested in a Mac pro, which you use to maintain your blog and various web sites, and to edit and share multimedia files through flickr and youtube. You have a broadband wireless network in the house you share with two other digital arts students, and you are constantly connected, often browsing for new software downloads or joining massively multi-player online games. Out and about you stay online through your i-phone 3G. Your department has its own immersive multimedia environment, developed in house, through which students can review each others work and get feedback from staff, but you dislike the institutional VLE which is used for more routine aspects of study, particularly the focus on text-based communication, as you are dyslexic.

Learner D

You are a history student with a hearing impairment which makes it sometimes difficult for you to participate fully in a curriculum that has traditionally been based around lectures and seminars, with a proportion of marks in the first year set aside for contribution in class discussion. Nevertheless, you find yourself in demand as a study partner thanks to your expertise in recording lectures and class activities for review, and your use of voice-to-text and other software such as Soundswrite to support your studies. You like to present your work as professionally as possible, and you use databases of historical images to add flair to your reports, and Smirk to add captions when you have to do presentations. You are also a fast touch typist and communicate with friends using skype, facebook, and online discussion forums, all from your (now dated) laptop. You study mainly in the University library: from home you help maintain a local history web site in your spare time.

Learner E

As a learner, you succeed by paying attention, working hard and by asking for help when you need it. You like to build a good relationship with your lecturers, and expect them to be available online and by email when you need them. You are thorough in your approach to study, and you like to be clear about what is required and how you can achieve a good grade. If lecturers introduce new technology, you expect a proper training session and support while you learn to use it. You avoid plagiarism conscientiously but you are not always sure how to evaluate or make use of the information you find on the internet, and the sheer quantity sometimes overwhelms you. You would prefer lecturers to point you to a small number of reliable resources to answer a particular assignment question. You are not confident about working collaboratively with other students.

Learner F

You are very confident (perhaps sometimes over-confident?) about your ability to find information on the internet, and you range widely among open courseware sites and other sources of academic content. You use your lecturers as just one among several sources of expertise to help you achieve your learning goals. Your use of technology tends to be personal and idiosyncratic, so you do not like being told what systems to use for a particular learning task. On the other hand, you are quick to see how technology can help you succeed. You are competitive and strategic in your approach to study, and your use of personal technologies and information services reflects your desire to get ahead.

Learner G

You are a social learner with a strong preference for collaborative working. Multi-tasking is second nature to you: in fact you find it hard to study unless you have music playing and facebook, skype and instant messenger open in the background. You're an active member of the students' union and several University clubs, all of which have Facebook sites where you contribute to blogs and upload or comment on group photos. You see the contacts you make at University, and the social life of a student, as an essential aspect of the learning experience. You also spend at least an hour on Facebook every night to keep in touch with family and friends back home in Spain. You share notes and recordings of lectures with other students on your course in European politics, and you meet up to discuss assignments, sometimes sharing resources you have found (usually through google or wikipedia), but you do worry about plagiarism.

Learner H

As a nursing student you have a large human biology component to your studies, which you find challenging, and you prefer to review the theory when you can see its relevance in practical nursing situations. You are also expected to evaluate the evidence base for nursing practice, but you are unsure what tutors mean when they say that your essays lack a 'critical' perspective. You maintain a personal development portfolio in which you keep track of the new skills you are practising, but you don't like taking large paper-based files around with you. And at the end of a long

day it can be a chore to write down and reflect on everything that has happened on the ward. You would like more credit for the patient care and communications aspects of your course as these are areas you feel are important and in which you really shine.

Learner J

As a postgraduate research student, your focus is on completing your own research project, which crosses the boundaries of music and computing. You need to review a wide rage of background material in both these subject areas and some others including sound engineering and psychology. Two of your three supervisors are based at different institutions to your own, and they all come from different research traditions: you are starting to feel very isolated in your particular area of interest. Although you are gaining an eclectic range of skills through pursuing your research – mainly self-taught – you worry that your eclecticism might handicap you when it comes to academic and industry jobs. And employment is becoming a pressing concern as your funding has come to an end and you may not be able to complete your studies without some additional source of income.

Learner K

You are passionate about your course in earth sciences, especially fieldwork and the opportunities you have had to collect real data as part of an institutional study of pollution levels in nearby wetlands. So far you have managed to conceal your terror of statistics by sharing assignment work with other students, but the first year exams are approaching and there is a statistics paper that you are sure you're going to fail. Once exams are over, you have an opportunity to spend the summer leading treks in the Andes, but you're not sure whether this will be a chance to gain important life skills or just a distraction from your studies. After all, you may be having to revise your stats for a re-sit!

Learner L

You are enrolled on an English for Academic Writing module as a requirement of your entry to the second year of an engineering course, having studied already for a year in your native Bulgaria. You find the written exercises from the module easy enough but they do not cover the technical language you need for engineering, and you are still struggling to follow some of the lecturers. There are other Bulgarian students on the course and you tend to work together, but you have already been warned that you should not share each others' written work, even though it's OK to collaborate on projects (very confusing!). You have good programming skills and do well with CAD/CAM assignments but are less comfortable with the text-based discussion forum and course materials, which form the main activities in the course VLE.

Learner M

You are a busy single parent trying to juggle a part-time masters in counselling with home and work responsibilities, and to fit your assignments around the other demands on your time. The support of your fellow students and mentor are an essential aspect of the course experience for you. Like others, you have chosen to study counselling after benefiting from therapy yourself, and you find the course can

be emotionally as well as intellectually demanding. You seem to get on fine at the fortnightly course meetings, but while other students contribute almost daily to the text-based discussion forum, you don't feel comfortable communicating in this way. You do not consider yourself computer literate – in fact you bought your first computer (a laptop) just to study on this course – and your anxieties about the technology are almost making you consider withdrawing.

Learner N

You are a highly motivated student on a foundation degree in the built environment, a course which seems to require a lot of collaboration and group work. While you are happy to contribute to group activities, you resent being assessed on such work as you don't feel you will be rewarded for the extra work you always put in. You also feel that you spend a lot of your time helping other students get up to speed with technologies such as digital cameras, geographical positioning systems, and CAD software. Since you already have a lot of technical know-how, you would rather be given more challenging activities, ideally working alone. The e-portfolio system you are asked to use feels out-of-date, and you don't see why you can't just link to your personal blog and flickr site where you already upload photos and notes to support your studies. You also feel you should get some recognition for the mentoring you do on behalf of other students.

Learner P

You are the first person from your extended family to attend university and you expect (and value) some of the more 'traditional' aspects of the university experience: personal access to lecturers who are experts in their field, and access to high quality library resources. You are rather dismayed to find that you are expected to do most of your work alone or with other students, and that online resources and internet searches have replaced journals and books as the primary resources for your course in English literature. You can see the point of a digital drop box for assignment submissions but you would like to get feedback face-to-face from a tutor who can explain where you are going wrong (and right).

Learner R

Your family is making big sacrifices to support your studies in Law and you want value for money from the University you have chosen. In particular, you expect 24/7 access to specialist resources from the library, rapid feedback on your assignments and on any problems or queries you put to your tutors, and support for you to use your own laptop and PDA for learning. For you, technology use is an aspect of professionalism, and you expect your tutors to model consistency and good practice in their use of technology for teaching. Your course will include opportunities to experience a range of professional legal contexts and you are expecting consistent support from your tutors during these periods of study off-campus. You see the contacts you make at university as an essential benefit of being a student, so you expect access to friends, fellow students, clubs and societies, from the start of your academic career through to alumni status.