Using a Learning Management System organisation as a resource site for blended learning

Liz Askew
Centre for Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching (C-SALT)
University of the Sunshine Coast

The majority of universities in Australia provide learning and teaching resources to staff via their corporate website, or through their own intranet system. This is not possible at the University of the Sunshine Coast and so an alternative had to be provided. Rather than place many files in a central area, it was decided to utilise the organisation facility of the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS). This poster outlines the goals and processes of designing the site as well the future plans for its implementation.

Keywords: Blended learning, learning management system, professional development

Introduction

By 2011 the University of the Sunshine Coast, a predominantly on campus teaching institution, reached the stage whereby every course delivered was required to have an online presence. As a result, all teaching staff were beginning or continuing their journey into blended learning. Support for teaching staff up until that point was delivered predominantly through individual faculties, with few university-wide resources. To provide professional development resources to all staff, allowing anywhere, anytime access, a central repository of material was needed. A Blackboard organisation was chosen to become the access point for these university-wide resources, in lieu of an ability to utilise the university website.

Development

Initially it was thought that the use of an organisation in Blackboard would be limiting. Concerns included the limited flexibility of presentation and arrangement/management of material. However, on further consideration it was decided that there were potential benefits of using the LMS, along with elements that could be maximised to encourage staff development in the online environment. The analysis of using Blackboard is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of the Blackboard environment as a resource site

Challenges	Advantages
Difficult to format and make visually appealing	Model layout and design
How to manage high volume of material in folders	Model good practice in presenting material e.g. learning modules
Lack flexibility of HTML formatting	Good practice examples of educational tools available in the LMS
	Demonstrate future possibilities e.g. template material
	Opportunities to use and model collaboration tools
	Closed to public – potential to encourage sharing

By using the LMS, staff will be able to experience modelling of elements of course design directly in the LMS itself, share in an safe environment with a known audience and see examples of pedagogy from the showcase area, all of which are characteristics of effective professional development for teachers (Harlen & Doubler, 2007). Including and encouraging examples of staff practice will demystify the unknown of what colleagues are doing, seen as a significant barrier to educators integrating blended learning approaches into their teaching practice (Diaz & Brown, 2010). The use of the LMS blended learning site will both 'emulate the student experience' along with providing a home for a learning community, both factors used as guiding principles in Penn State University development of blended learning (Diaz & Brown, 2010).

A secondary outcome of the site is that it will become an educational tool to build staff competencies, and this aspect is already being trialled at sessional staff development workshops. Staff are guided through the site to find resources to address their individual learning needs, and are encouraged to take an experiential learning approach to 'help themselves' with future queries.

Design

The site was geared towards those staff beginning their journey into blended learning, but provided considerations for staff who were further along the blended learning continuum. A conscious effort was also made to not overload the site with information. For example, the key areas of good practice and planning included a one page overview of each topic, a more detailed explanation for those interested to learn more, then a case study from a university staff member to illustrate each topic. An outline of the structure is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Blended Learning site structure

The essentials	Blended Learning frameworks including good practice and planning Best practice modules – based on available tools Student survey results Accessibility, Copyright, Netiquette
What's new	A snapshot of sites indicating the future of blended learning in higher education
Blended Learning at USC	Blended Learning Statement Support details
Showcase USC	Examples of technology being used by staff
What works for me	Blog – staff contributions
Educational technologies	Summary of available technologies plus support material
Blackboard help	Orientation material, Tip sheets, Examples

Next Stage

A key development of the blended learning site will be to make it dynamic and endeavour to grow a community of practice among its users. This will require an investment of time and energy of support staff, as virtual environments are prone to decline in activity (Johnson, 2001). A communication plan will be required to notify staff of the changes, developments, new resources, along with notification of responses to their feedback. Strategies will need to be developed to promote and maintain interest in the site, along with activities to encourage active engagement; factors recommended for enhanced practice (Keppell, McDermott & Hard, 2011). It is hoped that an advantage of using the LMS will be the closed but familiar environment, potentially providing a private community for USC staff and therefore increasing the potential growth of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002).

At an appropriate time, the site will be formally evaluated. An analysis of the Blackboard usage statistics will be conducted to gauge the level of activity in each area. A follow-up survey will be implemented to gather staff feedback regarding the usefulness of the site and to inform future developments. Evidence gathered will be fed into a University level Action Research project lead by a member of the Blended Learning Team.

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Author contact details:

Liz Askew, easkew@usc.edu.au.