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SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE E-LEARNING: A UK NATIONAL FORUM

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Abstract

This article outlines the progress of a national Supporting Sustainable eLearning Forum, funded by the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre. The aim of the forum was to move e-learning on from project innovation to embedded practice, and address questions around the scaleable nature of e-learning. Assimilated views of a wide range of support staff are presented. These include ideas on how to devise strategies for supporting Higher Education lecturers in the design, development and implementation of online courses; disseminate good practice in supporting sustainable approaches to eLearning; and contribute to the ongoing debate in the sharing and reuse of e-learning resources.

Keywords

staff development, sustainable e-learning, reusing learning resources, learning objects

Moving Beyond Innovation

We are living in an age in which advances in information and communication technologies are giving us more choice than ever before in the way we work, shop and spend our leisure time. These increased possibilities have significantly changed attitudes towards learning and have increased demands for wider access and lifelong learning. Huge investments have already been made across the education sectors to provide more flexible curricula, however, in order to extend the use of e-learning beyond pockets of innovation some major issues have to be addressed. Firstly, increased flexibility requires the development of a work ethos, tools and infrastructure that will promote the development of new pedagogues. Secondly, creating specially designed course materials to satisfy the greater range of demands for learning requires considerable investment: a factor which makes resource development only viable for courses with large student numbers or sizeable budgets. Alternatively, we need to explore ways in which we can move beyond the innovation stage to embed e-learning, so as to benefit from economies of scale. This requires the realisation of a vision of a future in which reusable resources might be developed, shared and reused by teachers and learners. Resources, produced by publishers, teachers, support staff and students themselves, would be stored in digital repositories, where they could be easily accessed, recombined and reused within online courses. In an ideal world, these resources would be designed so that they could be adapted to fit different educational models, subject disciplines and levels of study. Governments across the world are taking steps to achieve this vision and move beyond innovation. For example, the UK Government recently published a document 'Towards a Unified e-learning Strategy' which provides a focus for the development of sustainable, scaleable e-learning strategy. The document outlines the Government's belief that institutions must take responsibility for embedding sustainable e-learning (DfES, 2003, para 49). In order to achieve this, fundamental questions must be addressed, including:

- What support for e-learning is currently available?

- Who supports e-learning across institutions?
- How can lecturers be supported in developing effective yet sustainable e-learning courses?
- How can the reuse of resources be supported and encouraged?
- What sorts of learning environments are required?

Implementing a UK National Forum

The core of a national e-learning strategy will be the use of a variety of government funded organisations that already exist to support the development of sustainable e-learning. For example the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) is a national network for staff working in Higher Education, with 24 Subject Centres and a Generic Centre. Each Centre has provided considerable support for the development of e-learning in Higher Education, and in doing so has begun to question the sustainable nature of recent developments, in particular the drive toward content creation. The LTSN has sought to promote the sustainability of e-learning by encouraging its embedding within teaching practice and by working with those who support its development to tease out practical strategies to make this happen.

In 2003, the LTSN Generic Centre established the Supporting Sustainable eLearning Forum as an opportunity for the exchange of ideas by a wide range of support staff, educational developers and learning technologists from the UK Higher and Further Education communities. The aim of the forum was to bring this wide range of staff together in order to devise these practical strategies for supporting staff in the design, development and implementation of online courses; disseminate good practice in supporting sustainable approaches to eLearning; and contribute to the ongoing debate in the sharing and reuse of e-learning resources. Through the forum, practitioners were invited to examine how to move e-learning on from project to embedded practice, and address questions around the scaleable nature of e-learning. The forum had four main themes, each of which was explored during a full day session. These included issues in relation to sustainable online course design, sustainable online course implementation, online content design and development and institutional change. Each session was based around contributions, collaboration, construction and communication of new ideas. During each session key contributors were invited to present ideas, through draft commentaries and presentations. Participants could share ideas and collaborate by brainstorming ideas during discussion fora. The ideas generated were drawn together to work towards and construct new models of staff development. These were communicated through the forum website and an electronic discussion list. The forum members represented a wide range of diverse institutions from across the UK. They were mostly support staff and included learning technologists, librarians, audio visual staff, IT support staff and directors of learning and teaching centres. Their experiences and ideas for sustainable e-learning are outlined in the following section.

Key issues in embedding sustainable e-learning

What support for e-learning is currently available?

Each institution adopts a unique approach to supporting e-learning. Some institutions implement support through institutional teaching and learning strategies which make mention of e-learning, others through strategies which specifically deal with e-learning and a few through university mission statements. The local drivers for staff development cited during the forum were frequently context specific and varied according to individual institutions schools and faculties. Some are driven by research, by external professional organisations, others are steered by partnerships with other institutions. Other drivers result from government policy such as inclusion and quality assurance/enhancement. However, increasingly student expectations are driving the implementation of e-learning. Current support for e-learning is varied and includes awareness raising events (workshops, institutional conferences, etc); tailored support (departmental sessions, away days, one-to-one staff mentoring and institutional development projects); developing partnership with academics (eg on programme development, joint writing on evaluation, audit or survey results); joint development bidding (internal or external) with academic departments; working within committees, including formal accreditation programmes and learning and teaching committees; developing resources (eg online guidelines, templates and case studies or portals linking to

relevant external materials and support); and the provision of accredited, postgraduate courses leading to membership of the UK Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

Who supports e-learning across institutions?

At first glance this question may seem straightforward. However, the roles of support staff are often unclear. This is partly due to the fact that that e-learning support structures vary widely across institutions. There is a confusing mixture of approaches: from centralised "learning service", "teaching and learning" and "academic practice" units to decentralised support within faculties frequently located in IT support units and libraries (Beetham, 2001). The role of an "e-learning advisor" in one university could differ widely from that in another. The uncertainty of roles and identities can lead to inconsistencies in approaches (Oliver,2003). Forum delegates identified poor coherence across support groups, caused by individual units having different cultures and different agendas. This may result in academics being supported by staff from different units using different terminologies, leading to incoherent support. Effective staff support must address the issue of deficiencies in communication between these groups in order to improve the synergy between learning technology support staff and academic staff.

How can lecturers be supported in developing sustainable e-learning courses?

Within the forum, the most commonly cited problem in terms of supporting the development of e-learning courses was associated with confusion between technological issues and educational issues. Academic staff designing online courses often begin with content development and tag learning design around the available content resources. However, to ensure effective and sustainable course design, this approach must be reversed with learning design being finalized at the first stage. One approach could be based on Learning Design (Koper, 2003; Liber and Olivier, 2003), an initiative through which ideas and standards behind future Learning Environment tools are being developed. Learning Design is based upon the idea of students working in groups and being assigned roles, to work within a specific learning environment design, on activities. Students have access to content appropriate to the task in a wide variety of formats. The sustainability of courses is determined by the reuse of these objects: content, activities and learning designs, requiring a major shift in the way e-learning is implemented and supported. Academics often have a clear idea about the content they want to use, but may need guidance and support in reusing course designs or activities. Some forum delegates had developed successful strategies to bridge cultural barriers between academic and support staff through close collaboration with academics through roundtable discussions (Ehrmann, 1998) or partnerships with academic "champions". Team collaboration was seen as the key issue for the implementation of sustainable e-learning. This requires support staff to be aware of the perspectives of others, which, in practice, is seldom the case.

How can the reuse of resources be supported and encouraged?

Much of the current focus in e-learning is on reusing content across courses, subject disciplines and institutions. Searchable databases within institutions were seen as essential in being able to source suitable materials. However this raises major issues of uploading, tagging resources with metadata and resource classification. Initially academics are likely to reuse content which they have produced themselves, by repurposing their own resources and examples of this were presented during the forum (see briefing papers by Boyle, Newlands, Thorpe and Mason, which can be downloaded from the forum website) . However, reluctance to share these resources with others has already been demonstrated across a number of pilot studies (for example Campbell et al, 2001). Common barriers were cited as IPR, time, metadata tagging and confidence. Three potential solutions to encourage academics to share materials were suggested. Firstly, academics may start off by reusing "off the shelf" materials, which can help to build confidence in sharing self-generated resources. Secondly, materials may best be used within communities of practice, such as subject disciplines, schools or faculties. Thirdly, it is important to share student activities and ideas on course design in order to share ideas on good practice. Finally, automatic metadata tagging is a potential time reducing incentive to encourage the uploading of resources to shared repositories (see the briefing paper by McAndrew).

What sorts of learning environments are required?

During the forum, techniques for sharing and reusing content within Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) was discussed, since much of the current e-learning support is in this area. Current, commercial VLEs are extremely limited. Firstly, they do not allow for easy resource sharing. This leads to duplication

and reinvention of materials within institutions. The practice of linking to resources outwith the VLE or using a database has been used overcome this serious problem. Secondly, many VLEs overemphasise the use of content, rather than enabling the development of learner activities. Thirdly, few VLEs are linked to student information systems and have not yet fully automated many administrative functions. Therefore a critical factor is the implementation of Virtual Learning Environments which allow lecturers to experiment with pedagogical design and to easily update or re-organise content. An additional problem is the inflexibility of VLEs from the students' perspective. In the future students will negotiate their assessments, set up online discussions, develop resources and perhaps even design their own classes.

A strategy for supporting sustainable e-learning

A strategy to support e-learning will have to address the key points highlighted in the forum, many of which are social, rather than technological. Six major points of concern have been assimilated from the forum discussions. Firstly, it is important to consider the drivers for eLearning as a first step in offering staff support. If the main concern is improving teaching practice, then learning design could be a priority. Making teaching resources (eg Powerpoint slides) available online should not be dismissed, but ought to be seen by academics as making content available, rather than as teaching. Secondly, resources need not only be created by tutors, but can also be created by students. The role of the student needs to be reviewed. Perhaps in the future students will design their own courses - this will be a focus of the next series of SSeLF forum sessions. Thirdly, when support is offered by teams of support staff, it is important to develop a common language and communicate using the same terms. Fourthly, effective staff development should be multi-strand: ranging from lunchtime seminars, hints and tips, "drop in" sessions to engaging "champions". Fifthly, the sharing and reuse of content and activities should be encouraged through the development of communities of practice. Finally, there should be emphasis on time management for academics which reflects additional activities beyond the usual range of duties.

In summary, the development of sustainable approaches to e-learning requires major shifts in support and leadership. Some of the major challenges pertain to cultural and social issues, rather than technological concerns. These will be further explored in the next set of SSeLF forum sessions which are due to take place early in 2004.

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