

# A SECONDMENT MECHANISM FOR ENHANCING THE USE OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

**H.Y. Dagleish**

Social Sciences and Humanities Faculty  
Loughborough University, UNITED KINGDOM  
*h.y.dagleish@lboro.ac.uk*

**B.R.P. Dawson**

Learning and Teaching Development  
Loughborough University, UNITED KINGDOM  
*b.r.dawson@lboro.ac.uk*

## **Abstract**

*The secondment project was devised to allow lecturers time to update teaching skills and become familiar with the use of learning technology. This paper describes the origins of the project and the outcomes after four groups totalling 20 lecturers had completed a secondment to the project. The project has been judged successful and there are plans to continue secondment in the future.*

## **Keywords**

*Learning technology, web-based resources, online learning, learning support, staff development, secondment.*

## **Background**

In our roles in learning technology support we frequently encounter lecturers who would like to be able to spend time updating their teaching skills and the materials they use in modules. However, most lecturers have a workload that includes research, administrative tasks and teaching. Many take pride in their teaching and are frustrated at the limitations imposed. Time out to update teaching methods often just does not seem possible. For support staff it can be difficult to work effectively with lecturers who are always in need of quick-fix solutions.

One solution is to carry out the work to include learning technology into a module **for** lecturers. This can be effective, but requires close collaboration. Problems arise if the lecturer insufficiently understands pedagogic issues, what technology can achieve, or the amount of work a given approach may involve. It can result in inferior materials if the academic, who is the subject specialist, cannot afford the time to ensure quality content. Lecturers also become dependent on support, relying on others to make changes to materials. A major drawback to this kind of support is that the lecturer is denied any opportunity to reflect upon their teaching strategies and to adapt in a way that allows different teaching methods to complement one another (Laurillard, 1993).

Loughborough University introduced 'Learn', its own web server for online learning in 1998. Learn provides every module taught at Loughborough University with designated space, creating pressure on lecturers to develop resources for it. However, few had the necessary skills and, where Learn was used, it was often in perfunctory ways, in the form of reproduced lecture handouts, or administrative support for a module. Support staff in the University were concerned to do as much as possible to improve the quality of the resources provided, especially as students were increasingly demanding more materials on Learn. Recognising the low skills base in relation to the demands of Learn and that lack of recognition for the effort involved in developing new resources was a problem for lecturers, the secondment project was initiated, funded by the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (Dagleish & Dawson, 2001).

## The Secondment Project

The secondment project provided funds to buy out the teaching commitments of lecturers for one semester, to allow them to develop or extend innovative teaching in their modules. The intention was to empower and assist lecturers in generating and maintaining their own highly interactive, stimulating and effective learning resources for delivery from the Learn server.

Any lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, or the Faculty of Science, was eligible for secondment under this scheme. The initial secondment project was funded for two years, allowing for a total of 17 secondments, i.e. one member of staff from each department in both Faculties. A group of lecturers was seconded in each of four semesters. Departments could choose to have more than one person join the project, either to work cooperatively or on diverse projects but without additional funding. In all, a total of twenty lecturers have completed the scheme.

Before the first secondment session we had a long lead-in time, which proved vital. Departments needed to arrange timetables that created free time for the lecturers involved. Secondment was not intended purely as an opportunity to upgrade technical skills or to learn a new package; we also wanted secondees to stand back from their teaching to consider new pedagogic approaches (e.g. Laurillard, 1993). As some training needs were common to the secondees as a group, the lead in time was also necessary for planning an appropriate programme of workshops and seminars.

## Getting Started

In devising the secondment project, our objectives were to:

- Contribute to the professional development of the secondees
- Explore examples of best practice in the use of learning technology
- Lead by example, setting a high standard for web-based learning resources
- Build up a skills base at departmental level
- Generate some examples of how the web can be used imaginatively
- Create a toolkit of web 'widgets' that can be re-used by everyone
- Investigate common problems with web-based learning – e.g. copyright and plagiarism issues.

The key features of the mechanism we chose were:

- Departments received £6,000 to cover the cost of replacement teaching for secondees.
- Lecturers who were hesitant about learning technology were strongly encouraged to apply.
- Applicants completed a form detailing objectives, work plan and dissemination arrangements. They were interviewed to help establish these details and their IT skills level (Salmon, 2001).
- Applications were assessed by group that included the Head of Staff Development and the Associate Deans for Teaching who would oversee the programme.
- The Secondment programme started with five half-day workshops and seminars, given by the mentors responsible for delivering the project, other specialists and invited speakers.

## Secondment seminars

Everybody on the programme was working to enhance a specific module and subject areas varied widely. In one semester we had lecturers from the Departments of Geography, Materials Science, English, Economics and Art & Design. The lecturers involved had varying expertise in the use of learning technology and differences in their approaches to teaching methods. However they were all experienced lecturers who took pride in their teaching and wanted to develop new skills.

The period of secondment was two days per week for 15 weeks (30 days). Obligatory programmed sessions were set for seven half days. This comprised an initial series of five workshops, one per week for five weeks and presentations by the secondees at the half-way stage and on completion.

Planning a programme that would give everybody some relevant core material, a chance to discuss and develop their approach, without constraining participants or ignoring the skills they already had, was difficult. Sessions included such things as the basics of writing web pages, considering pedagogy and institutional requirements. Considerable effort was made to combine practical approaches and pedagogy into the same workshop. We took care to introduce branches of learning technology, such as computer mediated communications, which were less commonly used at Loughborough (Salmon 2001).

In the organised sessions we tried to encourage a sense of group identity. Additional support was provided on an ad hoc basis and secondees were encouraged to call with problems they had. We found that the secondees often would struggle with a problem alone, rather than ask for help. The culture among lecturers meant that they frequently felt that problems were theirs to solve. It was difficult to obtain feedback from the initial group until the final session, when presentations became more open. It then became clear that some seminars were regarded as either unnecessary or perfunctory.

Feedback from participants was used to refine subsequent secondment sessions. We revised the programme, increasing the amount of time spent on writing web pages and reducing time spent on administrative detail of module specification. We arranged to go regularly to individual secondees to discuss progress in addition to encouraging them to contact us with problems. Subsequent groups worked much more closely with their mentor. However, mutual support between secondees did not occur to the extent we had anticipated, only being evident at sessions where they presented their work.

## **Evaluation of the programme**

A formal evaluation of the programme was carried out by a member of the University Quality Enhancement team to report on the project (Kennedy, 2000). One-to-one structured interviews with secondees and mentors were conducted. A senior academic interviewed those who had been overseeing the project.

Consistent themes were identified from these interviews. It was found that, for secondees, the most highly valued aspect of taking part was having time to reflect on teaching, or on a particular learning problem. The majority found they needed time to absorb new information and to reflect on their project. They therefore believed the arrangement of two days per week for one semester a better model than (for example) an intensive two-week course. Many used the time to solve specific learning and teaching problems. Some had found it difficult to take the whole time allotted because of continuing departmental responsibilities.

The other most valued aspect of Secondment was learning about learning technology and improving their web skills. All had improved in both specific skills and in confidence using IT. Each felt they had benefited from the knowledge and experience of web-authoring tools, of CAA systems, of disabilities legislation requirements etc. Secondees gained additional transferable skills and many have authored web pages that are examples of good practice. Most secondees were found to have valued the one-to-one help received from their mentors more highly than the organised sessions, some confessing that they found it useful to keep themselves 'on-task'.

Funding was seen as vital for the secondment project to be successful. It both enabled the lecturer to have a reduced teaching load and, perhaps as importantly, allowed the project to be taken seriously by others in departments. Student feedback on using the resources developed has been positive, providing evidence of success. Secondees are now prepared to extend the use of online learning into other modules they teach and to recommend its use and the benefits of secondment to colleagues. The experience gained by support staff in working with lecturers means we now have a better insight of their problems. Secondment has also demonstrated that use of learning technology in teaching need not be restricted to those enthusiasts who are seen as 'techies'.

## **Outcomes**

The time spent on projects will have long-term benefits, not only for the secondees and their students, but also often for colleagues, for example by using web-based CAA to reduce marking time (Croft et al.,

2001). CAA question banks have been made available for colleagues to use and web pages provided for students that will be useful both in the targeted module and later, in other parts of the degree programme.

There are more generic benefits to the university as a whole, where lecturers on secondment have provided the impetus to resolve long-standing issues such as:

- Clarifying the institution's position on ownership, copyright and IPR for web-based materials.
- Exploring methods for the high-quality rendering of mathematical equations on web pages.
- Establishing image archives to provide electronic portfolios for fine-arts students.
- Linking computer-based learning with computer-based assessment.
- Developing a mechanism to make specialist services such as animation available.

The secondment project has been seen as successful, both by the lecturers involved in it and more widely by the University. It has allowed secondees to develop new skills and resources. Most of our early objectives have been met, with the exemplary resources that were developed now being used to support learning. The evaluation report after submission to the Programme Development and Quality Committee led to the extension of the secondment project for a further three years.

The project steering committee will continue to use evaluations from secondees, to allow us to adapt to changing demands of emerging learning and teaching strategies. The content and timing of seminars will continue to be regularly revised. A core of seminars and workshops is likely to remain to provide the project with a clear identity.

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