

Bringing e-learning home: An experiment in embedding e-learning using departmental e-learning advocates

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This paper provides an overview of an innovative project currently being undertaken in English departments in the United Kingdom. The project explores the effectiveness of a departmental or other subject-based unit approach to support for the embedding of e-learning in Higher Education. It seeks to provide answers to the question of how effective and sustainable e-learning practice can be encouraged in a departmental teaching community with a departmental *e-learning advocate*. Their role is to act as both a catalyst for change within a department and a source of practical help and advice for those wishing to make greater use of e-learning. Six departments, representing a range of contexts and modes of 'advocacy', have been selected for the 2006-7 academic year. The project aims to investigate whether we can be smarter about the integration of new technologies at subject level, while at the same time asking questions about the cultures within which academic and teaching communities understand, and come to terms with, the need to change their practice.

Keywords: e-learning support, English studies, embedding, cultural change, staff development

Background

e-Learning, by its very nature, demands considerably more planning than traditional course development. However, there is little evidence that pedagogy is much considered in this process, with far too many staff seeking to model traditional practice onto e-delivery. Support, at all levels, is often either overlooked or not effectively used. (Stiles & Yorke, 2003, n.p.)

Over the last 6 years the English Subject Centre (one of 24 subject-based units established to support teaching and learning in UK Higher Education) has sponsored 22 different e-learning projects in the English Subject Community. The aim has been to provide both individual lecturers and small teams with financial resources to develop their skills and expertise in the emerging field of e-learning and thereby encourage the cascading of these new pedagogical ideas across their departments and the community as a whole. This kind of support can help to develop innovative practices (Hannan & Silver, 2000).

In 2002 and again in 2005 national scoping studies of e-learning in English Studies in the UK have attempted to discover the uptake, use and perceptions of e-learning in the subject from a practitioner's perspective. After the first study it was noted that given the primacy of the notion of human exchange and interchange, the culture of the subject had not been so quick to embrace the application of IT, and indeed, in some places cultural resistance to the introduction of IT persisted (Hanrahan, 2002). In the three and a half years between the two national studies the uptake and use of e-learning has grown significantly. The 2005 survey, for example, has revealed a high level of use of some form of Virtual Learning Environment (almost 100%), however a lot fewer practitioners appear to be using e-learning to its fullest potential in imaginative, engaging and interesting ways (Lucas, 2006). This is particularly true in areas like the use of discussion fora, the development of literacy or writing skills, improving accessibility to learning materials generally and the development of new forms of online assessment and feedback. These results indicate that sponsoring small-scale innovations in the subject may not be the most effective way to embed e-learning best practice in English studies. E-learning innovations did not appear to be permeating the office walls.

In addition these studies and projects mirror research findings elsewhere into barriers to the uptake of e-learning more generally in higher education (HE), i.e. practitioners' lack of time, technical expertise as well as a lack of understanding of the potential of using these new teaching tools to enhance the student

learning experience. Whilst there is widespread recognition of the potential benefits of incorporating e-learning into a range of traditional teaching techniques, and a willingness to share resources that are developed, few English academics are able to find the time to realise their ideas (Lucas, 2006).

E-learning support structures differ widely across HE institutions (Wiles & Littlejohn, 2003; Oliver & Dempster, 2003). Centralised support models commonly revolve around 'educational development units' or specialist 'e-learning teams' who might work with individual academics in departments across the whole university and who may also second staff to work on designated projects. These units organise workshops, open days and may run accredited e-learning courses. Decentralised approaches include the appointment of faculty or departmental e-learning advisors (usually an existing member of academic staff or learning technologists). Another popular approach is the appointment of 'e-learning champions' within an institution who promote the utilisation of e-learning and might support the development of an e-learning related project or initiative in their school. Holtham (2005) however notes the challenges faced in sustaining and developing e-learning champions including work overload, and local dissemination issues. Oliver & Dempster (2003) note that the operational context is important and that there appears no ready model – no single, clearly successful, path – that ensures that e-learning will be embedded.

Although we have no empirical evidence of the extent of support for the embedding of e-learning in all HE institutions in the UK, our impression is that in most cases it is remote and spread too thin to offer the level of 'hand-holding' that our academic community needs. Almost all English departments, however, have either an e-learning enthusiast or a group of interested academics some of whom may have pioneered initiatives in e-learning. Could we harness their energy to explore a subject-based approach to e-learning support? The idea of engaging with this diverse group of subject-based academics and using them as advocates of pedagogical change and innovation from within their departments – a bottom-up, holistic view of embedding e-learning – is the central focus of this work-in-progress.

Funding for the project comes from the *Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Distributed E-learning Strand*, the aim of which, from a practitioner perspective, is to provide guidance on how to access, plan and use e-learning resources within appropriate e-learning systems (Bailey, 2006).

Project aims and key questions

By providing six English departments with an e-learning advocate we hope to:

- 1 Have a foundation on which to provide evidence-based advice on effective and sustainable staff e-learning support models to the English subject community. *By allowing different approaches to be developed and compared can we be smarter about the integration of technologies at a subject level?*
- 2 Raise overall understanding amongst as many members of each participating department as possible, of the ways in which e-learning can broaden their pedagogical toolkit and potentially enhance the overall student experience. *What methods are most successful? What factors affect interest and uptake?*
- 3 Help overturn some of the entrenched beliefs held by academics within the community towards pedagogical innovation by enabling them to make educationally sound choices about using technology in their courses. *Can discipline-based approaches to e-learning support overcome academic scepticism?*
- 4 Encourage contribution to research and publication in the area of e-learning from within the discipline. *Are we merely replicating existing practice online or can the teaching and learning of the subject be enhanced?*

Project approach

English departments (including literature, language and creative writing) across the UK were invited to submit proposals indicating how they would embed e-learning in their departments over the academic year (2006-7) given the support of a nominated *e-learning advocate* for one day a week. Their role would be to act as both a catalyst for change within a department and a source of practical help and advice for those wishing to make greater use of e-learning. Interested departments were encouraged to submit innovative ideas which reached across the department and might involve design, development, refiguring or creation of e-learning materials, one-to-one consultancy, training, workshops etc. Applicants would

also have to demonstrate how the support model proposed would integrate with existing institution-based strategies, initiatives or support structures. The proposal would also have to show that there was a serious commitment to the project at a senior level.

In all we received 13 proposals of which six were chosen by subject centre staff and an independent external e-learning support professional who has also been appointed as an evaluator for the project. The selection criteria included; strategy, experience, impact, sustainability, need and spread of contexts.

A network of six of these departmentally-based *e-learning advocates* has now been established. They comprise a mix of both senior and junior academics from a range of HE institutional contexts. The network is being managed by the learning technology officer at the English Subject Centre who is responsible for the professional development of the advocates, monitoring of individual projects in relation to submitted schedules/plans and overall management and critical evaluation of the support models studied in the project as a whole. A web-based project management tool is being used to help facilitate project discussion, deliver announcements, monitor progress against individual milestones and allow advocates to reflect on their experiences throughout the project in a blog-like format. In addition a baseline survey, focusing on the six unique contexts, has been carried out.

Overview of advocacy models

Department of English & Creative Writing – University of Lancaster

The English department at Lancaster have a successful track record in the teaching of Creative Writing. Their advocacy model will use the established Creative Writing methodologies as a starting point for the development of e-learning in the teaching of literature. The tools used within the virtual learning environment (VLE) designed to engage Creative Writing students and tutors in a process of *creation-response-creation* will be adapted to the teaching of literature by promoting the more fluid articulation of critical arguments/counter-arguments and to promote a sense of the critical text as process.

Department of English – Bishop Grosseteste College

The English department at Bishop Grosseteste runs both an undergraduate programme and provides input to the Primary and Secondary teachers' programmes. The department is well-resourced technologically (Whiteboards, tablet PC's etc) and so the advocacy model will provide information, support and advice to all staff in how to effectively use the technologies to make stimulating learning experiences. The key to this approach is the development of subject specific resources as examples of best practice for dissemination within and beyond the college.

English – University of Northampton

This advocacy model will explore levers for change that might facilitate the uptake of technologies within a department. The advocate will be facilitating the move from basic use of e-learning to more integrated, interactive and innovative pedagogical approaches across all modules. These developments will occur during a major 'curriculum revision' exercise. This will be achieved using such means as a VLE site where e-learning work-in-progress can be shared by staff, use of on-line logs and portfolios for assessment and the incorporation of regular student feedback into the development process.

English – University of Hull

The advocacy model at Hull centres on the use of the Interactive Whiteboard – a technology which brings together many associated e-learning tools – as a catalyst for the development of e-learning skills more generally in the department. The project also aims to build a collection of 'Whiteboard materials' which will be made available to the wider community.

English – University of Wolverhampton

The advocate will establish a regional network for e-learning in English studies between three universities. They will liaise with departments on e-learning developments within the region; discuss and suggest ways in which e-learning could be used within particular departmental contexts; support individual initiatives as an external friend; act as a conduit to enable colleagues to make useful contacts in the region; to disseminate relevant information and ideas (e.g. via an e-bulletin).

English – University of Central England (UCE) - Birmingham

The advocacy model at UCE will explore best practice in blended learning courses delivered through the VLE. The advocate will work with colleagues teaching the first year poetry module to create a best practice example of integrating e-learning into undergraduate teaching. This will assist in the development of VLE courses across the department. The project involves developing the skills of staff in using discussion fora, planning online activities that jigsaw with classroom work and with students' independent learning. There will also be monthly themed workshops involving all teaching colleagues in the department.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the variety of support mechanisms which evolve during the course of the project using this departmental 'advocacy' framework will bring e-learning support home and provide valuable new insights into best practice for encouraging the adoption of new teaching methods or materials in the teaching of English. By having six discipline-based advocates working simultaneously in a variety of institutional contexts with their departmental colleagues we also hope to gain insights into models of support which will be applicable across the academy.

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