Oxford University Computing Services

WebLearn:
Supporting Peer & Self-directed Learning

LTG Case Study

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WebLearn – a flexible tool

Weblearn offers a flexible platform for supporting teaching, learning and administration. It has a user-friendly interface making it possible for individuals to tailor their sites in accordance with their needs.

WebLearn is based on the open source software Sakai. A community of developers at universities across the world improve and design tools on an ongoing basis. These are integrated directly into Oxford University's WebLearn.

WebLearn tools for assessment and various forms of communication are free to use for all Oxford students and staff.
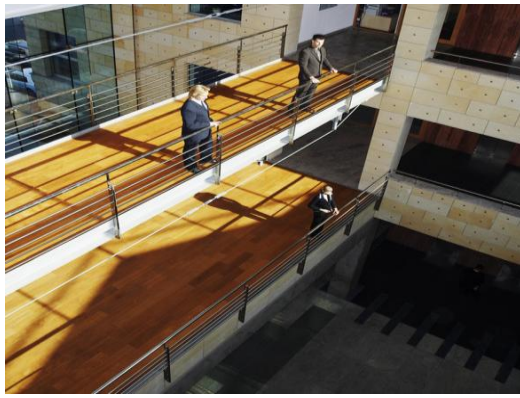
Inspired by an OUCS lunch session on WebLearn, Kate McClune has experimented with new teaching approaches. Since Trinity term 2010 she has used WebLearn to support her tutorial teaching of English undergraduate students. WebLearn has proved a valuable way of offering her students resource-based learning, peer-group learning and online discussions on subject-related content. She now plans to extend her use to provide a single place for course information and support.

Educational Context and Challenge

Considering teaching in higher education a reflexive and adaptive practice, Dr. McClune is experimenting with learning technologies with the aim of enhancing the learning experience of her students. One of the educational challenges of teaching Old and Middle English to undergraduate students is in finding ways of making the linguistic aspects of the syllabus inspiring. A more general educational challenge is enabling an interactive, lively and engaging learning community. To address these challenges, Dr. McClune has extended her tutorial teaching to include online activities to extend discussion beyond the classroom, support further exploration of the syllabus, to change the classroom dynamic and to give individual guidance.

Using the chatroom tool in WebLearn

Dr. McClune has found that students are more willing to engage – and disagree – online than in traditional tutorials. She used the online chat room to provide activities before and after tutorials, giving students a mixed blend of face-to-face and online support. She observed differences in the way students interacted in the different modes. She has found it pedagogically rewarding to use the chatroom tool in WebLearn in the following ways:

> "Students seem more confident in disagreeing with one another in the WebLearn chat-room than in tutorials. They feel freer there."
>
> Dr. Kate McClune

- To facilitate discussions before and in-between tutorials
- To strengthen her students' self-directed learning
- To encourage peer-scaffolding

Her reason for favouring the chatroom tool, over the forums tool, had to do with her observation of the students' interaction patterns: it seems to best facilitate lively academic discussions.

Stimulating discussion

Before tutorials, Dr. McClune posts questions on WebLearn for students to respond to in the chatroom. Contributions can be of informal character, but will form part of her evaluations and end of term reports, and contributions are thus, almost a "stipulation for attending the tutorials". These pre-tutorial discussions make the face-to-face tutorial more interesting. During tutorials, Students often offer relevant aspects or examples but the format leaves little time for engaging with these further beyond the set syllabus. Dr. McClune encourages her students to raise those points again in the chat-room, and this has resulted in a broadening up of the content of discussions as the students have embraced the online opportunities to discuss further and make links between materials. Dr. McClune moderates the discussions, and follows up on unresolved matters.

Steering learning

Kate is using WebLearn as a means of offering her students resource-based learning, on her WebLearn site, she points students to relevant resources on the internet. This enables her to guide her students to self-directed learning experiences closely related to the topic they study. She has provided a range of links to examples of contemporary adaptations and uses of medieval literature, e.g. in cartoons and children's TV. By exploring these links, students can make connections between medieval literature and 21st century cultural phenomena, and critically engage with the different versions. She also uses WebLearn to provide access to images of medieval artifacts to enhance the learning experience: "A lot of the poems the students are reading mention treasures, swords or shields, and when I link to images of those, they can get a better visual understanding of what is described – and that makes it more alive for the students."

Student response and outcome

Following her success with using WebLearn for supporting tutorials, Kate has decided to make WebLearn her default means of communicating with students from Michaelmas 2010 onwards. While having received no formal feedback on WebLearn use from students, she is certain that students are satisfied with the integration of the virtual learning environment in to their teaching. She has seen a change in the nature and level of interaction and debate in discussion and the statistics available for site administrators on WebLearn make it evident that all students have consulted each discussion item and link more than once, indicating that they do find it valuable and useful.

> "Using WebLearn has made a difference in terms of assisting the students in taking more responsibility for their learning. Instead of constantly emailing them reminders, I now upload everything onto Weblearn, making it up to them to consult that information."
>
> Dr. Kate McClune

Virtual Learning Environments:
For communication and support

Themes addressed in scholarly literature

Students' self-directed learning can be steered and supported by posting links to credible external sources in WebLearn.

VLEs – from repositories to active learning spaces

Dutton et al.'s (2004) examination of the uses of VLEs at a large university point to the finding that Virtual Learning Environments are employed in very diverse ways. This is as a result of academic staffs' differing attitudes towards the technology, and their experience of VLEs' pedagogical affordances. Dutton et al. (2004) identify a typology of 6 different uses, equally divided between uses mirroring "one-to-many communication" and "many-to-many communication". In the first category VLEs are primarily used as information repositories, in the latter, the technology is used as a platform for the facilitation of dynamic peer-discussions, and compliments components of traditional lectures in blended models of learning. The typology can be used as a way of analysing one's own use of VLEs, and point to alternative future uses.

One-to-many communication

The use of VLEs are important for supporting learner autonomy, or to build up resource-based learning spaces. In Dutton et al.'s (2004) typology's first category, the emphasis lies on VLEs' capability to support accessibility and distribution of information (what Dutton et al. labels "eCopier", "ePublisher" and "eProjector"). Here, the Virtual Learning Environment primarily serves as a repository for students to consult for relevant information, and the teacher is the main contributor.

Many-to-many communication

Enabling peer-support online as a supplement to face-to-face increases the social interaction amongst students (Hughes, 2008). The types found in the many-to-many category ("eProject", "eTeam" and "eClassroom") are categorised by the use of tools that foster peer-learning and discussions. One of the pedagogical incentives for facilitating this kind of learning activity is to help build a social community in which students can informally reflect upon and explore ideas (Cockbain et al., 2008), as was the case with Dr. McClune's students.

WebLearn tools for active learning spaces

In WebLearn the forum and chat tools are examples of tools that can be used to facilitate an active online learning environment. The chat tool enables real-time conversations, and invites informal exchanges between students, who can initiate the communication. The forum tool allows the instructor to create more structured topics for discussion, allowing all members to asynchronously post, read and reply to other members of the site. Employing asynchronous online discussions as part of learning activities has several advantages, including the encouragement of a student-centred approach to teaching (for a list of pros and cons, see Butcher, Davies & Highton, 2006:88).

References

Butcher, Davies & Highton (2006). *Designing learning: from module outline to effective teaching*. London: Routledge.

Cockbain et al. (2009) "Adopting a blended approach to learning: Experiences from Radiography at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh," *Radiography* 15 (3), 242-246.

Dutton et al. (2004). The Social Shaping of a Virtual Learning Environment: The Case of a University-wide Course Management System', Electronic Journal of e-Learning Volume 2 (1), pp. 69-80

Hughes (2007) "Using blended learning to increase learner support and improve retention," *Teaching in Higher Education* 12 (3), 349.

WebLearn courses offered by the OUCS

- On OUCS' website you can sign up for ITLP courses helping you getting started or advancing in using WebLearn. The courses range from introductory courses to ones focusing on uses of specific tools. More information available here: http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/weblearn/index.xml.ID=guidance

- The LTG also offers drop-in sessions where you can get help with all things Weblearn. Drop-in sessions are called 'Computer 8' and are booked online.

Guides, video tutorials and best practice case studies

- Being a flexible platform, WebLearn can be employed in multiple ways with differing purposes. You can find inspiration, guides and video tutorials here: https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/info/

The Learning Technologies Group (LTG) at OUCS is committed to the following objectives:

- Providing and developing a central Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

- Carrying out and disseminating influential research into the use of C&IT

- Providing training in IT literacy skills and effective use of C&IT

- Promoting the use of C&IT in teaching at Oxford via our user communities, websites, news publications, workshops and events;

- Providing well equipped teaching and training spaces

- Promoting and supporting the use of online multimedia for learning and teaching via projects and services;

- Developing learning packages and project websites

- Recognizing and celebrating innovation and good practice in use of C&IT in teaching at Oxford;

- Ensuring that our practice is inclusive, up to date and in line with user needs.

The Learning Technologies Group