Online learning at Coventry University: You can lead a horse to water ...

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ABSTRACT

Coventry University decided in October 1998 that within a year all 2000+ modules of the University were to be supported by an online learning environment in order to enhance learning and teaching at the institution. Similar decisions are being taken and realised across the UK higher education sector in campus-based universities such as our own. The Educational Development Unit has been a central player in making the notion become a reality at Coventry, instrumental in evaluating suitable products for online learning and determining the overall requirements for institution-wide implementation. This paper outlines the five key principles that have informed our work over the past year towards this goal, namely:

- fully utilise central support;
- simplify procedures;
- provide local support;
- build on current practice and
- always expect change.

WebCT was chosen as the single, web-based learning environment at Coventry University and the "virtual classroom" which we have modelled in WebCT closely resembles the modular framework of our University. Towards the end of 1998 there was already a core of early adopters who were moving swiftly into this new environment for teaching and learning. However, strategies needed to be found to overcome the considerable resistance to change elsewhere within the institution. To this end, we have instigated a large scale and varied programme of events to raise awareness and develop skills in web-based learning and teaching. A further aspect of our work has been the creation and ongoing refinement of a "template" for the learning environment which is applied to all modules across the University.

Keywords

Online learning, WebCT, institutional change, educational development

Sharing a vision

The vision is compelling. All students, full or part-time, free to engage in dialogue with their fellow students and their tutors, to access their course materials, to submit assignments, to revise their knowledge, to collaborate on group tasks, to check their marks, to do research, in short able to study whether on or off campus at any time of day or night. All staff, full or part-time, free to engage in dialogue with their students, to provide a wide variety of resources and support activities to meet the differing needs and expectations of the student cohort, to monitor how each student is faring in their studies whether on or off campus at any time of day or night. What do we need to do to make this leap into online learning? Technically, mainstream implementation will have been achieved by the start of the academic year 1999/2000 and indeed all modules are already set up within the WebCT environment. We need more than a technological solution, however, if we are to claim success. 1998/1999 has been a pilot year in which we have confirmed that we need to change the culture of learning and teaching, overcome the anxieties of both learners and tutors with regard to using computer technology, embrace the new possibilities afforded by online learning and at the same time preserve what is valued in face-to-face situations. Our efforts are complemented by the work of the Task Force for Learning, Teaching and Assessment. This Task Force comprises 20 or so academics who for the past two years have been seconded half-time to develop projects which promote and disseminate good practice in learning, teaching and assessment in their subject discipline.
Utilising central support

A new context for academic and support staff has been outlined in the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy (http://www.coventry.ac.uk/structur/tlstrat.htm). Great emphasis has been placed here on exploiting the potential of C&IT in the promotion of students' learning. The implementation of an institution-wide learning environment demands that central support services co-operate on an unprecedented scale to effect change. Accordingly, a top-level group was established, supported by three sub-groups to inform on technical, user interface and training requirements. Each of the sub-groups was chaired by a Pro Vice-Chancellor whose role it was to ensure that all barriers could be overcome. With the collaborative efforts of the Educational Development Unit, Computing Services and Registry, the technology required for teaching and learning has been integrated with the administrative systems already in place, including allocation of accounts to incoming students and automatic updating of class lists.

Simplify procedures

The dovetailing of administrative and academic systems has been made possible by our University's decision to adopt one online learning environment, namely WebCT, and not to support any other. Automated processes have been designed over the course of the year to ease the burden on academics of adopting our chosen route to online learning. Principal amongst these is the universal cloning of a single template. The template has to be far more than a decorative backdrop giving the web space a common, corporate feel. The template has to offer something to tutors and students. It has to stand in its own right, persuade tutors that they are not starting from scratch with a new piece of software (yet again, for many of them), that someone has put thought into meeting their possible needs rather than finding the simplest technical or administrative solution, that it is worth getting involved in using WebCT for the students' sake as well as their own.

The template has been through many incarnations, starting as a more instructional tool, with plenty of "Replace this header with your module title", "Page 1 goes here" and so forth. We were thereby expecting tutors to achieve a high level of competence in all the functions of the system and to devote several hours to customising each element on each screen to their own requirements. We soon understood that this was an unrealistic expectation. Even in the current climate where change is a common topic of discussion and there was a general acceptance of the idea of an online learning environment, most tutors are fully stretched and unable to invest time and effort in learning the complexities of a new system. We had to make the introduction as easy as possible, to bring tutors in one or two steps up the development ladder. One aspect was to automate and streamline the production of WebCT modules and create accurate student accounts. Another was to refine the contents of the module template so that it was delivered ready to roll. Tutor involvement, or intervention, in the set-up was thereby no longer essential. Some 2,800 modules have now been cloned in WebCT from this one template. Each WebCT web has a solid base to start from with the individual module code and title automatically inserted on various screens. The template offers email and discussion board, calendar for general and personal use, links out to the library online and to web-based learner support materials; links inwards for students to see their marks and progress through the tutor's material (if any is added). Student feedback is anticipated, with a simple but effective evaluation survey for the tutor to release mid-session.

Provide local support

Members of the Task Force for Learning, Teaching and Assessment have developed an awareness of the educational potential of our online learning environment and are well placed to advise and assist other academics in their own or related disciplines. Further support roles have been defined to carry the process forward on a local level. Each of the 8 Schools of the University have at least one "WebCT expert" who is conversant with the facilities and procedures of WebCT, and a "WebCT administrator" who issues tutor passwords, monitors and reports on usage. The expert needs to be informative, inquisitive, assistive. The administrator needs to be communicative, methodical, reliable. Both roles need someone who is approachable and normally around. Here the personality and also the availability of the individual concerned plays a significant part in the local perception of WebCT accessibility. Some of the administrators and experts nominated are known for being hard to find or slow to act, or both. This is an area which we must improve in the near future.
Build on current practice

In the template, we have placed emphasis on communication and links to existing web sites. Indeed, one of the most attractive features of WebCT is the ability to direct your students out of it to external web sites for learning activities or research. We have offered a varied programme of staff development events both to raise awareness of the potential of the online learning environment and to develop practical skills in using the system. Most of the practical workshops are with a group of less than six members of staff. We also provide advice on a one-to-one basis where possible. We do not currently have a materials production unit in the University, academic staff generally produce their own course content. Whilst some are using FrontPage, the base line has to be MS Word and PowerPoint These can be brought into WebCT either by converting the documents into HTML or by creating a linking HTML file which gives students access to the original Word or PowerPoint file. WebCT is sufficiently flexible to accommodate different levels of experience in web-based learning and our template enables staff to mix and match accordingly.

Expect change

This past year of planning the implementation of online learning has been beset by many unexpected renegotiations and adjustments of targets. Whenever we began to feel that we were in control of events, the parameters changed. The imminent release of the next version of WebCT hovers over us still.

The Educational Development Unit itself has shifted in recent months from the periphery into the mainstream of the University. We have advocated change, worked on strategies for coping with it, supported its implementation. We have made a name for ourselves. Staff are beginning to say that they know where we are in the institution. They visit our web site, perhaps even bookmark it. However, change is perpetual and many faceted. So just at this critical juncture, it was decided that we needed reorganisation and with it a re-naming and a re-location. We are becoming CHED, the Centre for Higher Education Development. Our web address will have to follow in the near future. In the real world, too, we are moving to a building yet to be constructed.

Conclusion

Within the space of one academic year, the WebCT implementation project has primed the University for online learning. Research into and evaluation of student experience with WebCT at Coventry during the pilot year overwhelmingly supports the decision to proceed with web enhanced learning. Our initial target of 10% uptake and active use of the online learning environment during the pilot year was exceeded by Easter. There has been significant growth in interest and application since then. Faced with the challenge of engaging electronically with students, we have come to reflect more on the different forms of interaction we have with them overall. The most recent affirmation of its value has been the reported increase in class average this year to 65%, from a consistent average of 58% in one engineering module. Now that we have established a working solution to online learning within our own context, its success depends on us being able to promote benefits such as this.

We are providing an ever increasing number of information sheets, quick reference guides, presentations, briefings and workshops. Our WebCT Support Web (http://www.edu.coventry.ac.uk/webct) is growing continually and feedback from across the University (and beyond) shows that this is an invaluable resource, particularly for those are not able to attend our events. We are actively seeking further means by which tutors can share their positive experiences of teaching with WebCT and thereby inspire their colleagues to take advantage of the online facilities open to them. Our greatest fear at this time, however, is apathy amongst some tutors. They can still ignore the online learning revolution that has taken place here at Coventry University over the past year - but it’s getting more difficult.