

Swansea Metropolitan University, UK

### **Putting the VLE before the HE: Prior training increases course engagement (0203)**

Whilst there has been focus upon widening participation and suitable content of HE courses (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, 2004, 2006), little attention has been paid to the technological requirements of modern HE students. Evidence shows an increased awareness and usage of technology in general amongst the student population (JISC, 2007), but HE establishments appear to do little to prepare students in the specific requirements of VLE usage beyond 'induction' at the beginning of Year One, and then encouraging the students to self-learn the required skills. However, students of all ages overwhelmingly report the need and desire for further training in the use of VLE (Hutchings, in preparation; Kennedy et al., 2008). Even amongst the 'internet generation' of students aged 18 – 25, student self-report shows a desire for provision of more training in the use of VLEs. In contrast to the perceptions of many HE providers, knowledge of social networking sites such as Facebook does not necessarily equate to a general IT literacy extending to VLE use (Hutchings, in preparation).

Where training is provided at the start of the first year of study, this occurs at the worst possible time for new students; entry into HE can be a confusing time for the new student, with many life-changing events occurring which may lead to high levels of stress (Sarafino, 1998). New students are often overwhelmed with information, not only from the academic aspects of their course requirements, but also from the social life of their establishment. At this time it may be very easy for the technical aspects of VLE use to either be ignored or not fully engaged with.

However, particularly at a time when HE tutors are being encouraged to make extensive use of TEL (UCISA, 2010), failure to engage with the VLE system may lead to the student not receiving pertinent information and materials, and subsequently disengaging from the course at an early stage of their studies.

Whilst some HE institutions and individual lecturers are starting to explore the use of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) as a forum for discussing course content (Cloete, De Villiers, & Roodt, 2009), focus upon the specific usage of HE VLEs has been sparse. The University of Bradford has contacted students prior to enrolment with questionnaires regarding their use of TEL (Yorke & Longden, 2007), and research from other universities has focussed upon examining TEL abilities and expectations with first-year students (e.g., Benfield, Ramanau, & Sharpe, 2009). However, no study to date appears to have actively encouraged students to go inside the VLE of an institution and learn how to use it prior to their physical arrival at the HE campus.

### *Current Study*

The current study, carried out at Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU) in 2010 - 11, aimed to explore whether providing training to students prior to their university admission would lead to improved course student retention and student VLE use in comparison to students who were not trained with the VLE prior to the course.

Participants were 77 students enrolling on their first year of study in the School of Psychology and Counselling. Fifty-two students were contacted by letter five weeks prior to their course enrolment and were given instructions of how to access a

module folder on the SMU VLE (Blackboard). Each participant was allocated a unique username and password to allow the researcher to examine which participants engaged with the training module. To act as a control group, 25 students who were also enrolled on the course were not contacted and were not aware of the training module. As some students who were contacted did not access the training module, it was decided to split the experimental group into two sub-groups; those who had engaged with training ('*trained*' group;  $n = 24$ ), and those who had not engage with training ('*untrained*' group;  $n = 28$ ).

The *trained* group accessed a specially designed module which provided text documents and podcasts explaining how the VLE worked. Dummy content was made available to give participants practice with accessing and downloading PowerPoint presentations and documents, taking part in on-line quizzes, and using items such as a digital drop-box and anti-plagiarism software. All items were provided with full text explanations of how they worked and their uses on the course. In addition, a discussion board was made available for students to contact each other and the academic staff. The training module was switched off one day before university enrolment to ensure that those who participated in the training did not provide access to participants from the other groups.

During the academic year all students took part in general VLE training provided by SMU and there were no differences in the treatment or access to any of the VLE provisions of the university. At the end of the academic year (June 2011) data was collected from the VLE for all students and were analysed by group (between-subjects).

Statistical analysis of the data found that the number of withdrawals from the course were significantly lower in the *trained* group than both the *untrained* and the *control* group ( $p < .05$ ). In addition, the *trained* group showed a greater overall usage of the VLE in general than both the *untrained* group (48%,  $p < .01$ ) and the *control* group (40%,  $p < .01$ ). Average test marks were marginally higher for the *trained* group than the other two groups ( $p < .1$ ).

These data suggest that, by encouraging students to utilise the tools with which they will work at a time which is both convenient and non-critical, the training of students in the use of a university VLE prior to enrolment appears to encourage subsequent VLE use, aid student retention, and possibly aid in student mark improvements.

Whilst this study was carried out on a small scale and was unable to explore other potential factors (e.g., student attitudes towards VLE and training), these can easily be incorporated into further research which utilises the tools already available to HE institutions.

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