

SOLE Case Study Series



Education

Colin Harrison

Elisabet Weedon

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Website: <http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/>

Executive Summary

Two case studies reporting on the experiences and behaviour of students from two modules in Education are summarised here. These two studies were carried out by the Education centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (ESCalate) as part of the SOLE project.

Purpose of the study

SOLE is a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) via the [Learning and Teaching Support Network \(LTSN\)](#) Tranche 2 initiative and the [Joint Information Systems Committee \(JISC\)](#) to undertake an independent evaluation of students' usage of virtual learning environments (VLEs) in higher and further education. The purpose of the study is to draw out the effectiveness of VLEs in supporting different subject areas, different national agendas (such as that of widening participation) and student learning in general.

Background

The two case studies, undertaken during February to June 2003, come from the subject network of Education. One (Case Study 3) is a post-graduate module with a small number of students in a large pre-1992 university. The second case study (Case Study 4) comes from a large post-1992 university college based on a second level, year-long undergraduate module. Case Study 3 used WebCT and Case Study 4 Blackboard to deliver the online component of the module.

The study methodology was based upon the evaluation framework set out in the handbook for learner-centered evaluation of computer facilitated learning projects in higher education ([Philips et al., 2000](#)). Several aspects of the research has drawn on the Critical Incident Technique pioneered by Lockwood ([Gilbert and Lockwood, 1999](#)). The approach is designed to provide an in-depth set of case studies based on course modules across a range of subjects, with a wide range of data and collection methods. The two modules participating in the case study were markedly different – the main differences were level of study, number of students on the module and the length of the module. These differences led to some unavoidable differences in data collection. Within both case studies the following methods were used:

- Student questionnaires;
- Student diaries;
- Transaction logging (throughout in Case Study 3);
- Recording a sample of interactions (in Case Study 3);
- Interviews with tutors involved with the module;
- Focus group with the students (Case Study 3).

Profile of participants

A total of 93 students participated in Case Study 4 with seven students participating in Case Study 3. However, not all students participated in all aspects of the data gathering. In terms of those that completed questionnaire 1, four out of the seven students in Case Study 3 had been educated abroad and were non-native English speakers, the remainder were educated in the UK with English as their first language. All the students in this case were aged over 21. In Case Study 4 all the students were native English speakers with 97 educated in the UK and 3% in Western Europe. All of the Case Study 3 students were female, 94% of the Case Study 4 students were female.

Learning models – explicit and implicit

The learning models evidenced in these case studies supported a constructivist/social constructivist approach to learning. The VLE was used, in both cases to embed these principles into the module and the module was structured to reflect the use of collaborative tools. However, there were some notable differences in terms of the structure of the tasks and the context within which the task was undertaken in the two case studies. In Case Study 3 students were required to work on collaborative tasks in pairs during class time; in Case Study 4 students were expected to work collaboratively in groups of 4 out of class time and there is therefore less opportunity for tutor input into that process. In addition, there is a considerable difference in the number of students that the tutors had to support in each of case studies.

Student and tutor roles, use of resources and communication

These two case studies demonstrate tutors who are all clearly committed to developing students who actively participate in the learning process and exploiting the communication tools in the VLE fully. However, there are some clear differences between the two case studies in relation to the use of resources and online communication. In Case Study 3 the students clearly made full use of all the resources available through the VLE including active use of the communication tools. In Case Study 4 the students commented favourably on the accessibility of the lecture notes and other resources and made full use of email to communicate with tutors and students; however, they made less use of the synchronous (Chat) and asynchronous (Discussion Board) tools for communication.

Motivation and confidence

The students in both case studies demonstrate similar motivation for the module in terms of initial and later rating. Motivational factors such as interest in subjects, personal goals were rated highly by both groups and both case studies agreed that being better than others and simply doing the module for credit was less important. For both groups there is some evidence that technical problems impacted on motivation. However, they differed in terms of their views on the motivational importance of the online communication element of the course. Case Study 3 students found the collaboration and sharing of ideas through the online communication motivating whilst Case Study 4 students recognised the potential for this but did not necessarily engage fully in this aspect of the module. It is interesting to note though that there is a potential anomaly here as the Case Study 4 students reported increased confidence in communicating online.

Support for students and staff

These two case studies demonstrate that there was institutional support for the staff involved in the development and delivery of online learning through staff development and technical support. The students in both case studies were well supported in terms of introduction to the VLE though this was done differently. Case Study 4 students had induction in year 1 of the course, whilst Case Study 3 students were introduced to the VLE during class time. For both sets of students the tutor was seen as offering crucial support and the notion that students could manage without a tutor on an online module was not accepted by either of the student groups.