

SOLE Report

Further Education Studies



Sue Timmis
Cynthia Cai

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

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Executive Summary

This is the summary of the FE report, which analyses the results of a study of post 16 courses (including A level, AS level and National diploma courses) conducted during the Autumn term 2003 and Summer term 2004. The two case studies took place in two different UK FE colleges, both of which use Learnwise as their virtual learning environment software. These 2 case studies form part of the Students Online Learning Experiences (SOLE) project.

Introduction

SOLE is a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) via the [Learning and Teaching Support Network \(LTSN – now HE Academy\)](#) 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 undertake some detailed case studies in FE institutions and to pilot the evaluation methodology in Further Education.

Methodology

The methodology of the study 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](#)) with several aspects of the research drawing 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 units across a range of subjects, with a wide range of data and collection methods.

The following main primary data gathering tools were used:

- Student questionnaires (two - one at the start of the unit and one at the end)
- Student diaries (two – one in week 3 and one two weeks before the end of the unit)
- Individual student interviews (at the end of the unit)
- Lecturer interviews (two – one at the start of the unit and one at the end).

Note: These two cases studies are presented together in this report but they should not be seen as directly comparable, in particular the approaches of the lecturers and views of the students have not been compared or their worth judged. They are distinct case studies with different populations and purposes and any comparative data (ie data presented together) should be viewed as a matter of contrast and interest only.

Students' profile

Case study 1 consisted of 2 parallel classes comprising 56 Psychology students at AS level studying at an FE college in the west of England. Case study 2 was a class of 13 students from either Art and Design or Fashion and Clothing National Diploma courses at an FE college in South Wales.

59 students out of a potential 69 students from both case studies completed Questionnaire 1 which included profile questions on gender, age, first language, and country of residence for secondary education. The casestudies were very similar in terms of country of education and

first language, with slightly more under 18s in the first study and a large percentage of females in the second study. See figure A below for a breakdown of participant profiles.

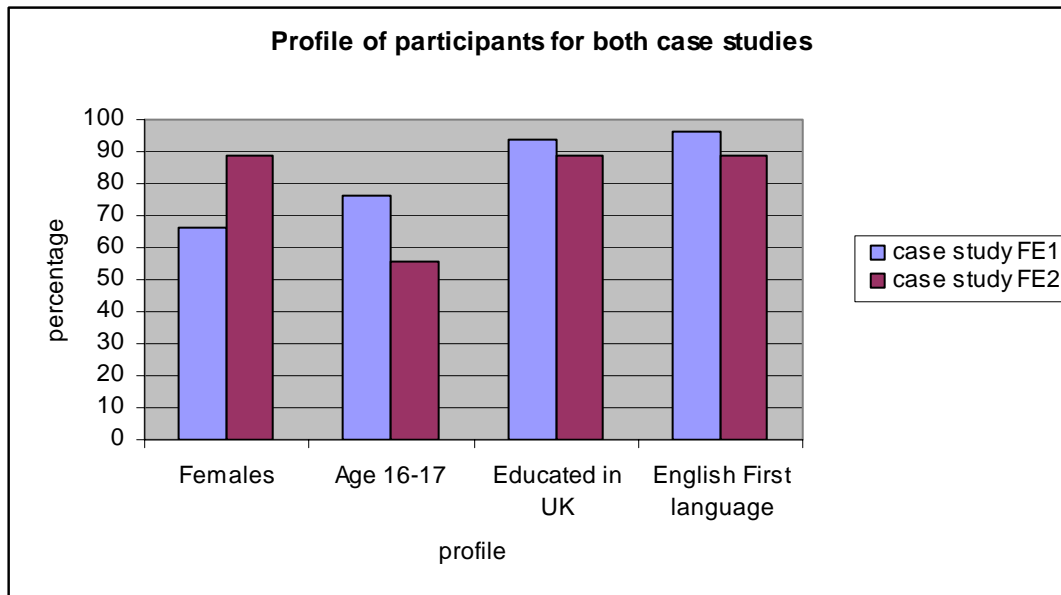


Figure A: Percentage profile of participants for both case studies

Learning models

The two case studies presented different learning models, although both intended to make students more independent learners, encouraged the active participation of the students and operated within a broadly constructivist framework. In Case Study 1, the lecturer implemented group learning, using a classroom-based interactive whiteboard, peer learning using the Learnwise discussion forum and web chat supported by the lecturer. The VLE was also used to support students with quizzes and course notes. In Case Study 2, the lecturer encouraged students' independent learning by doing research and experimentation, using the whiteboard and group work; the VLE was used primarily for access to resources such as PowerPoint presentations, course materials and the Internet.

Use of Learnwise

Only part of the learning models for both case studies were translated to the online environment. In both case studies, the VLE were used in the classroom or on campus only, with the lecturers on site most of the time. Online communication was used in Case Study 1, in Case Study 2, the VLE was used for access to course learning material as well as the Internet and PowerPoint. An interactive whiteboard was used in both case studies as a supplement to the VLE and as a classroom tool.

Lecturer, VLE, Working online positive motivator

Help and support from lecturers, the VLE and working online were found to be positive motivators for both case studies, and many students commented on the usefulness and motivating effect of having unit resources, and quizzes available in the VLE. Technology issues had a negative effect towards the motivation of students from both case studies. Communication online and personal needs were also positive factors motivating students from Case Study 1 while there was no reported influence from any of the factors for students from Case Study 2.

Motivation and confidence levels over time

In both studies, general motivation levels stayed more or less constant, comparing the beginning and end of the term, however students from Case Study 1 became significantly more confident over using the VLE and the subject over the time.

Issues of roles and authority

Both lecturers intended to place students more at the centre of learning and to support students to become independent learners. They saw themselves in the role of facilitator, or between a guide and a facilitator. However in both studies, whilst students were taking more responsibility for their own study, they consistently reported lecturers as having a strong leadership and expert role and were motivated primarily by help and advice from the lecturer, though fellow students were also reported as a source of help and advice.

Support gaps

Student access to the VLE was limited to within lessons or on campus in both case studies. Students who had no experience of using a computer or the Internet needed extra support in using Learnwise and in building their confidence in using it. Student support and training in both studies were underdeveloped.

Both colleges had a unit or staff providing technical support and staff development for teachers wanting to develop the use of VLE in both studies and the lecturers in these 2 studies were confident in their use of the VLE.