

CABLE 2- Getting Blended Learning Right from the Start

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Abstract The University of Hertfordshire Business School (UHBS) CABLE 2 project has had a significant strategic impact on the business school, delivering effectively on its main objective: *To inspire and empower new academic staff at UHBS to develop their knowledge and understanding of blended learning in their first year at the university.* Key objectives of the project were: (a) to integrate blended learning into a revised UHBS induction process; (b) to develop awareness among new academic staff, both visiting lecturers (VLs) and full time staff, of the university's blended learning strategy, enabling them to 'hit the ground running'; (c) to consider provision of a secure web/wiki site which could be accessed by new academic staff; (d) to up-skill the local workforce by provision of UHBS training. Results so far include: (i) integrated induction programmes run in September 2008 and January 2009, generating high levels of appreciation and support for further staff development activities among both new starters and senior staff; (ii) follow-up activities promoting the personal and professional development of our existing VLs; and (iii) a new 'UHBS VL Support' intranet (StudyNet) site set up in January 2009, designed to encourage ongoing engagement with blended learning once the formal induction process is complete. In effect, blended learning is now being used in the processes of new staff induction and VL development. Although the project was designed primarily to overcome the problem of academic staff resistance to engagement with blended learning, it has had a wider impact in building stronger working relationships within the university, for example between the business school and the university's Learning and Teaching Institute. It is also expected that the new staff development programme for VLs will support their improved employability and commitment to UHBS.

Introduction

The CABLE 2 project was delivered by the University of Hertfordshire's Business School (UHBS) in 2007-8, and forms part of the wider Higher Education Academy project Change Academy in Blended Learning. It was part of a university-wide initiative which followed on from the hugely successful CABLE 1 project in 2006-7. Each faculty submitted a project with the intended outcome of a sustainable blended learning innovation that would have an impact on the faculty and would make a long lasting difference.

The UHBS CABLE 2 Project was entitled '*New Academic Staff Induction- getting blended learning right from the start*'. It was led by the Dean's Policy and Project Manager Mary Taylor, with team members Caroline Large and Karen Robins (Department of Marketing and Enterprise), Sue Martin (Department of Management,

Leadership and Organisation), new staff member Ali Malik (Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics) and MBA student Hajre Hyseni.

The project has had a significant strategic impact on the business school, delivering effectively on its main objective:

To inspire and empower new academic staff at UHBS to develop their knowledge and understanding of blended learning in their first year at the university.

The project was UHBS-focused and has resulted in the creation of an enhanced new staff induction process for all new academic staff (both visiting lecturers, or VLs, and full-timers). This process introduces new staff to blended learning and to the university's virtual learning environment, StudyNet, at the induction phase and targets additional blended learning courses at the new staff during their first year at the university.

Links to Previous Blended Learning Research

The Business School's CABLE 2 project was designed to use self-reflection and focus group research to address an issue rarely touched upon within the blended learning scholarly literature: how to engage new academic staff in the use of information and communication technologies to enhance the learning experience of our students.

Although there is a growing body of research exploring the potential benefits of using e-learning to supplement face-to-face interactions between University staff and students (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; O'Hagan, 1997; Steeples & Jones, 2002; Biggs, 2003: Ch 10; Morris & Rippin, 2003; Ramsey, 2003; Alltree & Thornton, 2004; Gillett & Weetman, 2005; Jefferies, Bullen & Alltree, 2006; BurrIDGE & Öztel, 2008) and there are also a number of useful handbooks which enthusiastic tutors can use to support the development of their own blended learning practice (Salmon 2000, 2002; Garrison, 2003; Clarke, 2004; Race, 2005; MacDonald, 2006), still there is relatively little discussion of the challenge of overcoming resistance among the substantial number of academic staff who are either unfamiliar with, or hostile to, the use of technology-supported learning activities.

Using Morris and Rippin's (2003: 25) typology of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) adopters as being (a) explorers and enthusiasts, (b) efficiency seekers, (c) entrepreneurs or (d) emulators, we observed that there was relatively little discussion in the literature of whether and how staff in groups (a) to (c) should and could enthuse and involve their colleagues in the innovation process, thereby swelling the numbers in group (d). In the early years of the development of VLEs in the UK there was some discussion of the fact that many staff belonged to none of the groups (a) – (d), and were choosing to remain unengaged (Jones, Asensio & Goodyear, 2000; Freeman & Capper, 2000; Bennet, 2001). The literature surveyed by Freeman and Capper (2000), in particular, identified reasons why

academics might have an unsatisfactory experience with VLEs and highlighted a phenomenon which we also observed and documented at UHBS through research for the CABLE 1 Project: that within US and UK business schools, resistance appears to be especially strong among teachers of accounting and economics.

Within the literature on e-learning and blended learning, therefore, some awareness is shown of the fact of resistance among a significant proportion of university staff. However, few if any studies address the questions of how this resistance might be overcome, and how staff in a given institutional setting can be effectively supported in developing enthusiasm, confidence and a sense of belonging within a blended or virtual learning environment. As Meredith and Newton (2003: 46) comment, reflecting on evidence from a wide range of case studies including their own (Meredith & Newton, 2004):

“While Salmon (2000) would argue for significant staff development prior to any entry to e-learning, and recommends that this development takes the form of an e-learning course, the reality for staff on the ground is that this form of development does not exist.”

At the University of Hertfordshire in 2007 this statement was already, to a large extent, untrue because a wide range of support was (and is) available to serving staff through the Continuing Programme of Academic Development (CPAD) teaching and learning programme, and through the Learning and Information Services' (LIS) and Learning and Teaching Development Unit's (LTDU) half-day technical training events. However, at faculty level the business school's CABLE 1 project team identified a significant gap in staff understanding. Staff found it difficult to make sense of the technical possibilities in the light of their own subject-specific teaching and learning needs, and to see practical ways in which they could apply blended learning methods to enhance the learning experience of students on business modules. In designing the CABLE 2 project we therefore set out to explore ways of building staff understanding and enthusiasm for blended learning at the point of entry to the business school. This follows Salmon's (2000) recommendation to develop staff competencies *before* their entry to UHBS' distinctive StudyNet-supported e-learning environment.

Key Objectives of the Project were:

- To integrate blended learning into a revised UHBS induction process
- To integrate UHBS induction with other university induction events – one stop shop
- New academic staff, both visiting lecturer (VL) and full time staff to become fully aware of the university's and business school's blended learning strategy know who to contact and be ready to 'hit the ground running'
- To consider provision of a secure web/wiki site which could be accessed by new academic staff
- The provision of inducted staff that have 'bonded', feel valued and are inspired
- To up-skill the local workforce by provision of UHBS training

Methodology

A mixed methodology was employed comprising focus groups, interviews and secondary research using electronic resources to identify leading edge technology and latest educational technological applications. The focus group was selected as the most appropriate tool to extract feedback from the new academic starters of September 2007, using the expertise of a UHBS colleague and special transcription equipment. Interviews were conducted with both new starters and a range of university staff involved in preparing and delivering support and training for academic staff. These include personnel from the university's People Development Unit (PDU), the CPAD team, LIS, LTDU, Blended Learning Unit and Human Resources Department. Secondary research used electronic resources from both within and outside the university including the PDU website and comparable websites from other universities; online research into more than 350 resources such as websites, search engines, wikis, blogs, online magazines, forums, discussions boards, audio, videos and online ICT research results. Project awareness was promoted by posters, business school updates, informal networking and presentation at a teaching and learning forum.

Key Assumptions of the Project Team

New starters are relatively open to new ideas including blended learning and unlikely to be reluctant adopters at this stage.

The time was right to introduce blended learning into the business school's induction programme as the CABLE 1 project had successfully improved blended learning awareness and generated management support. This had led to the provision of resources including a learning technologist who could help to provide post induction support to new academic staff.

Focus Group Results

- Two focus groups were carried out as part of this programme: one with new full time staff who started work in September 2007, and one with current visiting lecturers (VLs). Numbers of attendees were low (eight in total) but it was felt that this was a finding in itself, in that anecdotal feedback received whilst organising these sessions indicated that staff were generally happy with the induction they had received.

New Staff Experiences of the Induction Process in 2007-2008:

Overall the business school's induction programme was well received, with staff appreciating the programme and believing that it provided them with a good basis on which to start their work at the university.

- *"...(the induction) was a good basic, it put everything into context and you felt that there were people there to support you, and we had a few*

names and phone numbers and faces that you could contact if you were struggling”

- *“That was an interesting day and I did take some things from that which I would like to build into next year’s teaching”*
- *“...(it) was one way of bringing us into the community here”*
- *“The business school induction book I keep by my side all the time, I refer to it a lot, but yes, there are still things that are missing out of it”*
- *“I did get Caroline’s Visiting Lecturer’s Handbook which was extremely helpful”*

It is clear that the half-day induction event delivered in previous years had been well received and met the needs to new staff to be welcomed and briefed on university support systems and their main duties. However, it had never claimed to be an induction into blended learning. It was a face-to-face encounter backed up by a print-based reference system. At the start of the CABLE 2 project it was recognised that we had an opportunity to introduce blended learning techniques to this process, to extend the event and provide follow-up online and workshop support.

Timing of UHBS Induction Event Presented Problems:

One of the biggest problems identified was that the 2007 induction was too late (it was held on 25th September). Whilst the rationale for this was sound (the later the induction, the more new staff would be available to take part) it resulted in those staff who started at the beginning of September - or even earlier - having no guidance when they needed it most.

- *“I thought induction was good but ... it was three weeks after we started... and I think it would have been better to have it slightly earlier because it would have helped”*
- *“Personally I started on 1st August so it was a long period... just getting a desk and settled in, so you were just floating around”*
- *“There should have been something in place for the person starting on the day they start, not just sort of given a few names and pointed off...you need resources there ready to go from day one”*

Delivery of Detailed Technical Guidance was Insufficient

It was also stated that detailed technical guidance provided was not given at the right time: too much given at the beginning, not enough given as the first semester goes on, at times when staff actually need it and could make use of it:

- *“I think that one hour or so wasn’t enough to give us an introduction into StudyNet which of course we need”*
- *“...so when it comes to assignment submission time, there are things that StudyNet can do that can help you, but if you do that at the beginning you will probably have forgotten it”*

- *“...and then gradually as the year progresses then there are more things that become useful to you but you don't need to know all these at the beginning”*

The guidance which was given did not really allow new staff to feel confident in using the technology:

- *“You were left with the idea that you were encouraged to do something, but not really any idea what it was, and what it involved”*
- *“I think perhaps a little more information about the IT systems and how they support teaching and learning would probably be quite useful”*
- *“Blended learning....that term has been widely used but no-one has come and said, how is that being reflected in the module, or what are you designing in terms of that”*
- *“There's lots of stuff out there but feeling, especially in your first year, I don't feel I've got sufficient time to do the things I would like to”*
- *“In terms of integration into learning practices here, it's rather like, you really have to feel your own way, there isn't any clear identification of what was expected or what you can do”*
- *“I want to know what blog is, blog training, and they do have wiki, that they send to us every time they have a three hours training”*

Attitudes Towards Blended Learning and Technical Support for Lecturers

Generally, staff were interested in the various aspects of blended learning, and willing to use them in their teaching. One interviewee suggested that staff do not feel that training has a high priority:

“I think in any other job, training is an integral part of the job, not something that you are expected to find time to sort of squeeze in somewhere, you know, whole office and departments close down to do a morning's training...not simply, 'By the way, this training session's here and if you can lever it into your schedule that would be terrific”

Time generally was seen as a problem for staff trying to ensure that they are up to date in their knowledge and practice:

“I did see something about podcasting...but it was right in the thick of things... so I wasn't going to take a day out for training as well. I don't feel I've got sufficient time to do the things I would like to do....where do you fit the time in to do it all when you are just trying to survive and do the things you need to”

Other Findings

The University of Hertfordshire's People Development Unit (PDU), Learning and Information Services (LIS), Human Resources Department (HR), Learning and

Teaching Institute (LTI) with its Continuing Programme of Academic Development (CPAD), and the Learning Technology Development Units (LTDU – the StudyNet development team) were all asked for their views on the induction process for new academic staff. Additionally, a survey of leading edge technology was carried out and considered. Each team could make some suggestions for improvement to its services for new staff and, indeed, all seemed eager to get involved. What an opportunity!

Colleagues in each area made practical suggestions which fed into the design of a new, integrated business school and university-wide induction process for new academic staff. HR suggested using Outlook diary facilities to book new full-time staff on courses ensuring they attend all induction sessions available within the university. They also highlighted the need for follow-up support, for example through a revised mentoring system. Discussions with the PDU led to revised plans for their standard induction workshop for all new university staff, taking heed of their own previous feedback and involving a change of venue to the university's Sports Village from September 2008. The LIS and CPAD teams agreed to get directly involved in the business school's expanded faculty-level induction event. The LTDU team recognised that they had little time available to run dedicated training sessions for business school academic staff, but the CABLE 2 team developed a system for publicising the existing range of LTDU sessions more effectively to VLs and new starters.

Conclusion

This was an interesting project using CABLE methodology, which supported the development of a communicative, highly networked team. Through working on this project, the team developed excellent cross-faculty links both with teams of academic staff from other faculties who were also engaged on CABLE 2 projects, and with colleagues in the central University of Hertfordshire units concerned with new academic staff induction. Through conversations with these other teams, it became possible to see through the complex overlaps/omissions of the established academic induction system and communicate the urgent need for enthusiastic, open minded new academic staff keen to engage with, rather than to resist, the potential offered by blended learning for enhancing their effectiveness in their new roles at the University of Hertfordshire. The relationships built are expected to continue developing as the business school seeks fresh opportunities to improve the induction process and to help academic staff 'get' blended learning right from the start.

Key Results of the Project were:

- Delivery of an integrated induction programme in September 2008 (3 days at the business school plus 1 day of central university induction) and again in January 2009 (1 'Welcome' day at the business school followed by 3 days of CPAD training at the university's Learning and Teaching Institute; then, 3 weeks later, 2 more days at the business school, focusing

on teaching and learning issues with a strong 'hands-on' emphasis on blended learning; then 1 day of central university induction). These events generated high levels of appreciation and support for further staff development activities among both new starters and senior staff

- Creation of a new post, *Faculty Co-ordinator of Visiting Lecturer Development* to further develop the induction process and the business school's follow-up systems and procedures to support the personal and professional development of existing VLs, leading to improved employability and commitment to UHBS
- Engagement with other university stakeholders in an ongoing dialogue about the recruitment and professional development of VLs from a wider range of backgrounds, including experienced business leaders who could be employed in a new way as distinguished speakers
- Creation of a new StudyNet site for 'UHBS Visiting Lecturer Support' which is exceptionally easy to access from the staff member's personal intranet portal. This is designed to encourage ongoing engagement with blended learning once the formal induction process is complete. There are also plenty of documents and live links to support the VLs' teaching, learning and professional development. New full-time staff also have access to the site and are encouraged to interact through the 'Blog' and 'Forum' pages.

In effect, blended learning is now not only being promoted within, but also being applied to support the processes of new staff induction and VL development. Although this project was designed primarily to overcome the problem of academic staff resistance to engagement with blended learning, it has had a wider impact in building stronger working relationships within the university. It also has the potential to strengthen the university's links with the local community, by improving the employability and commitment of the business school's visiting lecturers.

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