Establishing a virtual campus for distributed learners

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Virtual Learning Environment, Virtual Campus, Distributed Learning

The focus of the post 1997 UK's Government education policy has been on encouraging, and supporting learning and training, not for its own sake, but to enhance and perpetuate a world class, sustainable economy, which would be globally competitive for the foreseeable future. Prime Minister Blair's view is, that for the UK to continue to be an 'advanced' nation, there needs to be an acceleration of the transformation of its economy from an industrial, to a knowledge base (Labour Party Manifesto 1997). Charles Leadbetter, suggests that "in the next century, the engine of growth will be the process through which an economy creates, applies and extracts value from knowledge" (Leadbetter 1999).

Recent figures show that 90% of the UK workforce are employees of small to medium-sized enterprises (SME's) and virtually all newly created businesses fall into this category. These are now the engine room underpinning our economic, and wealth creation processes. Recognition, on a global scale, has to be given to the fact that in order to motivate this working population back into learning, societal attitudes towards education and training have to change. To enable this to happen, a whole new approach by learning providers is needed – one which reflects would-be learners needs, aspirations, expectations and complex, busy lifestyles.

Staffordshire University is pioneering a learning programme that makes use of technology to distribute learning opportunities, off campus, to SME's. And whilst technology facilitates a new approach, pedagogy and andragogy actually underpin, and drive the concepts that we are developing. There are other critical considerations: We know that traditional campus based education influences, and develops individuals, in many ways. The learner's total learning experience gleaned from 'going to' College or University is more than the sum of the parts of the classes and tutorials attended. There is the interaction with other learners as well as the ambience of the College / University environment; which we can refer to in shorthand as the 'campus experience'. If such an experience is of value, can virtual learning environments provide this same experience for the off-campus distributed learner? How will they do it? Will it be a similar or different set of experiences? To what extent can they be realistically compared?

The success of the 'virtual campus concept' and the efforts made by virtual learning environments (VLEs) to provide a worthwhile and meaningful set of 'virtual campus experiences', we believe, will be essential to maintaining retention and achievement levels, which are increasingly used as key performance indicators. Particular reference is drawn from a current Staffordshire University (UK) project, SMILE that is funded by the European Social Fund under Objective 3. This project, using a VLE, is being developed to deliver a range of business-related modules to SMEs off-campus. These learners are likely to be a disparate group, returning in many cases to formal learning after some time away, to a virtual rather than traditional campus environment. It looks at how we can 'personalise' learning for particular learner groups by being aware of appropriate learner interaction environments, the role of lecturers, the format and presentation of learning materials, learning styles (disseminated versus applied) and the 'happy factor' for learners (Clements & Smalley 2000)

FACE-TO-FACE .v. 'SOCRATIC' ROLES

Face-to-face lectures and tutorials are the most common form of on-campus teaching methods and we do not, and should not, suggest that there is any singularly better way to gain knowledge for the typical university level learner (18-21yr age group). However here, we are considering a new group - 'business learners' for whom the two-three hour lecture once or twice a week regime is an inappropriate method. What is not in dispute is the fact that the biggest benefit on-campus learners gain is access to, and involvement in, collaborative learning, both student à tutor and student à

student. The challenge for distributed learning deliverers is to what extent can this valued experience be replicated for off-campus learners using a 'learner-driven approach' (Wee Keng Neo et al 2001)

The first issue when setting up online collaborative learning is to decide to what extent the lecturer will get involved in the formation of learner groups, which tend to develop naturally, both socially and intellectually with on-campus learners (Preece 2000). The task for SMILE is more challenging given the diverse backgrounds and experiences of its learner group. Whilst we are considering using established personality/psychographic tests to formulate groups (such as Myers Briggs); for the time being, learners are grouped into 6-8 members, based on occupation / industry sector, though these are altered subject to the Learning Objectives involving group activity. Most VLEs have the capacity to include individual learner profiles which can be accessed by fellow learners, which can be used when groups are encouraged to form self-selected working groups (Barker 2001).

Throughout the online courses learners are required to discuss subject matter, along with their personal findings, from given tasks with their group members in the online courseroom. It is hoped that this method of collaborative learning will encourage the sharing of 'good practice' between the learners organisations. Although the learners do not have direct physical contact with each other, as would be the case for on-campus learners, we believe that they can gain more from this type of environment. For example, in an on-campus situation many learners have been found to be 'lurkers' in a discursive environment because they are unwilling to verbally air their viewpoints in front of other students in their class. In a VLE this can be overcome to some extent since learners' comments are posted into the courseroom asynchronously, giving them more time to reflect on the material. Well structured / serviced online courserooms can also help overcome the fears of those who are returning to learning after a lengthy period of time by allowing comments to be 'cut and pasted' from word processor programs into the VLE. This may sound obvious, but many learners who have been away from education for some time have concerns not just about the subject material, but also about their spelling and grammar abilities. On-campus learners may not have this particular concern since their views can be made verbally but, we would argue, with class sizes on the increase in many UK universities, a good VLE courseroom can produce a greater written response from off-campus learners than an on-campus lecturer could illicit verbally in a tutorial.

Guest 'speakers', as well as the module lecturers, are utilised in the virtual courseroom to enhance the learning experience (Clements 2001). Studies looking into the role of the 'information giver' at H.E. level, have shown that in an on-campus environment, the lecturer is expected to be much more 'hands-on' than with the off-campus groups (Duggleby 2000; Salmon 2000). This is most likely due to the fact that the on-campus learners are generally ill-equipped with respect to practical knowledge of the subject area; that is they've not previously been in full time occupation. However, with off-campus 'business learners' the lecturers' roles become intellectual, organisational and social, where they act much more as facilitators or moderators - making 'Socratic' interventions and pointing to links between group discussions and literature. This skill is sometimes called 'weaving' and is seen as crucial in making what can sometimes become a chaotic exchange of unstructured opinion a meaningful learning experience for participants. (MacKeogh 2000)

It must also be recognised that with adult learners the learning process is very much a 'two-way street', where the lecturer / moderator also has a lot to gain, including insights into the latest practices and applications of his / her subject area within industry. This knowledge transference can then be incorporated back into the learning materials producing a mutually beneficial, cyclical process where learning materials are constantly up-to-date with industry applications.

AN EMERGING ANDRAGOGY

There are many ways in which the teaching and learning methodologies differ between learner groups, especially between young adults (i.e. typical university age students – 18-21yr olds) and business professionals (Hodgson & Kambouri 1999; Mortimore 1999). Some of the important differences have already been touched on earlier in this paper, but there are other issues that affected the andragogy

chosen for the SMILE Project (See Clements & Birch 2002). In this project, the most important issue was how the lecturer developed the type of group work s/he is going to ask a learner to complete. Not only are there enumerable problems in asking the off-campus learner 'to go and look up journal articles or case studies', there is also the question of the appropriateness of the materials to this group of learners. The SMILE project is very much activity-based, supporting learning materials but, these activities are more closely keyed into problem-based and in particular work-based situations (Van den Bossche et al 2001). Every activity the off-campus learner is asked to do can be directly related to their own work experience, creating a much more 'individualised' product as well as being of practical and academic value.

RESOURCING AND LEARNER SUPPORT

Resourcing is one area where, at present, it is difficult to provide off-campus learners with access to the same variety of freely available resources as an on-campus learner and in cases where learners have no access to the university campus there must be plenty of support available to them. The way this has been accomplished in the SMILE Project is by providing a number of support mechanisms through the Internet and e-mail: 1) There is a full administrative support network for learners from the time they enrol to deal with queries, problems and general information support, available via telephone, fax, e-mail and in person. 2) The project has a dedicated web portal through which courses can be accessed directly. This portal also houses links to many important websites for information appropriate for the courses, including software and other resources e.g. journals, newspapers, subject dictionaries etc. The intention is to build and develop a learning community in a virtual campus environment (see Figure 1). 3) SMILE also provides an appropriate hard copy text for each course (on loan) to learners who cannot access their own copies.

Figure 1: The SMILE Web portal
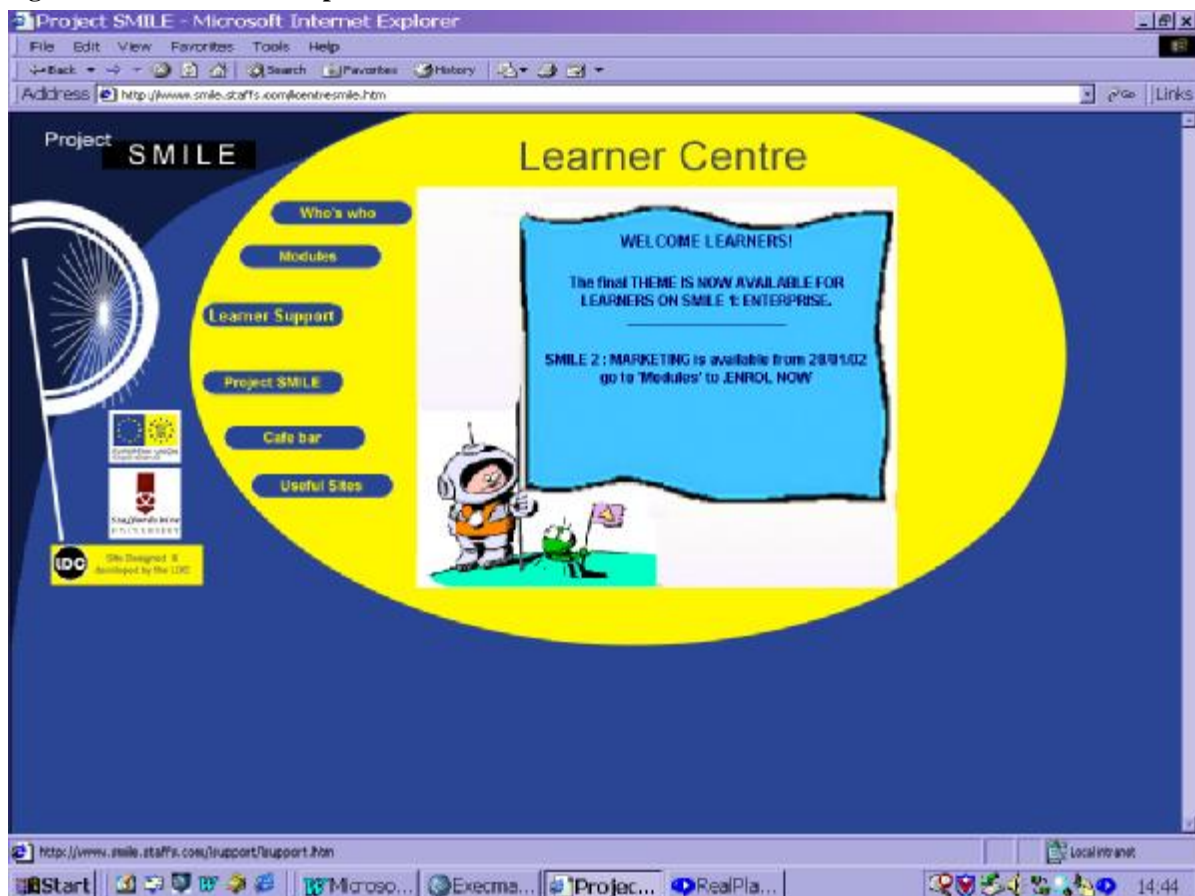
These methods are by no means an ideal situation for off-campus learners, but Staffordshire University are now working on an 'Off-Campus Programme' which enables distributed learners to gain access to the library and subject specialist online journals and databases which are already available to the on-campus learners. As part of the developments at the University, both the Library and IT Services were reorganised, so that they can deal more effectively with the needs and demands of e-learners.

We forward the suggestion that it is actually very difficult to realistically compare the experience of on-campus versus off-campus learners, as the needs and expectations of these two groups differ dramatically. When one considers that the most important issue for a learning provider is to ensure the most appropriate pedagogy / andragogy for each type of learner, then the comparison of experiences becomes a secondary consideration. However, as education is essentially a transaction between people, if learning providers can develop a dynamic learning community online, we will have achieved the most important on-campus experience for our off-campus learners.

If we are successful in designing an appropriate 'virtual campus' for off-campus learners, then a model may be created that enables us, as HE providers, to widen participation, to assist in the drive to get more people in HE, especially those who are older, are from different backgrounds, including lower socio-economic groups who perhaps have no family history in participation in learning at a higher level. It will be our ability to win over these groups that will probably have the biggest potential impact on economic performance, and help to make the SME sector smarter, more effective and more productive, and able to survive the increasingly competitive, and crowded, marketplace.

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