

## **Learning Bytes: Session 8: Wed 11 November 2010, 12:15-13:15**

### **How can I use Blackboard to make my course more interactive / collaborative?**

The session comprised a series of demonstrations / discussion talks by the following people:

- Andy Raistrick, Computing and Library Services: a demonstration of the pre-induction social networking project
- Cheryl Reynolds, Senior Lecturer, School of Education and Professional Development: using Blackboard to facilitate the Specialist Conference online module
- Paul Dagg, Learning Technology Advisor, School of Human and Health Sciences: using the adaptive release functionality
- Cath Ellis, Senior Lecturer and National Teaching Fellow, Music, Humanities and Media: using blogs and wikis within teaching
- Linda Lewis, Design Resource Co-ordinator, School of Art, Design and Architecture: a demonstration of the School's customised Blackboard home page

#### **Andy Raistrick: a demonstration of the pre-induction social networking project**

Following the 2009 Inspire Teaching and Learning Conference, a project team led by Ruth Brooks in the Business School secured University funding to pilot a project entitled "Pre-induction using social networking". The aim of the project was to help students with their transition to University, by providing both course-specific, general University and social information, along with the opportunity to communicate with their peers.

Following some initial research around which platform would suit their needs, a decision was made to use a customised Blackboard site as the initial entry point with links to a Ning social networking site (at the time this was a free service, Ning now charge for this). The Blackboard site was designed to be as appealing, friendly and accessible as possible; with icons for the different areas, photographs and details of the team, student created videos of the campus, Huddersfield and Storthes Hall etc. Content includes enrolment and course information, a section on leaving home and FAQs.

In addition there was a link to a 'Ning' social network site where the pre-students could 'meet' and communicate, which is very much owned by them. Once the pre-students had been given and accepted an unconditional offer they were set up to access Blackboard.

For anyone interested in adding multimedia to Blackboard – the Blackboard Beyond the Basics Session covers this and other more advanced aspects of Blackboard. In addition screencast guides are available on the ipark web site - <http://ipark.hud.ac.uk/> .

### **Cheryl Reynolds: using Blackboard to facilitate a specialist conference**

Cheryl uses a Blackboard course to enable networking and communication amongst a large cohort of approximately 1200 trainee teachers who are based in college centres across the north of England. They are all undertaking different subjects, so specialist subject groups are based online, as there is a great deal they can gain from each other's practice. The course itself has been customised with menu buttons/content areas being reworded to clearly reflect course literature and default content areas removed when not in use. The students were invited to provide feedback on the course structure to ensure it was as user-friendly as possible. As an integral part of the course the students all come to a conference at Huddersfield in April to deliver a paper to their peers.

Prior to the April conference the students are given a series of 'to do' tasks:

The First task is to set up an auto forward on their university email accounts to their personal accounts to ensure they pick up their email. The second task is to contribute a profile to the group they are assigned to via a blog in Blackboard. Learners have to post a profile including information on what they teach and whom they teach to alongside a photograph. This helps to make people seem human, and fosters social capital between the groups. There is a comments facility available so they are able to leave a comment on people's profile, which encourages collaboration.

The students are given some training on how to use the functionality in Blackboard. Useful links are provided for example to Summon, IT support, disability support and contact details for Learning Technology advice regarding accessibility issues etc. Examples of outline conference proposals are available so that the students can get an idea of what has been presented in the past.

In addition a discussion board has been set up so the students can talk to each other about their proposals etc. There is also a Link out to a Facebook page which offers a useful way of building social links outside of the course, although participation in this is optional.

### **Paul Dagg: Using the adaptive release functionality**

Paul explained that the adaptive release function available in Blackboard is, in his opinion, one of the most useful of the functionalities available within the VLE.

By using this function to control access to materials, lecturers are able to upload and organise all their files etc for the module and to then assign timely dates when they will become visible to the students. In this way students only see what they need to at a particular point in the module and are less likely to become confused and/or overwhelmed.

The function can also be used within sequenced activities, whereby the completion of an explicit activity will release the next task, learning material or feedback. For example students may be invited to read a file and once completed click a 'review' button which then loads a short quiz. On completion and submission of the quiz a piece of feedback is made available (dependant on result) etc.

So the function can be used to either tune the release of something depending on outcome, or release materials on a pre-set date.

*Paul volunteered to produce an adaptive release screencast.*

### **Cath Ellis: using blogs and wikis within teaching**

Cath explained that her priority for using these technologies within her teaching was always pedagogically based. She has been teaching online for around 15 years and makes use of VLEs to support learning and to provide students with a persistent environment, bridging the gap between scheduled sessions.

Cath explained that the term 'Blog' originated from weblog; a web-based log that is date and time stamped with entries appearing in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be individual or group and either public or private. Cath tends to set up private blogs for her students to use as spaces for reflection, whilst group blogs are used for more general activities. For example a specific task might make use of an embedded blog where students are asked to write a 200-word entry and also comment on each other's entries. Cath gave a demonstration of an interactive blog space with affiliated tasks.

A 'Wiki' is a collaboratively authored online set of documents; whereby the history of a document is always kept and one can go back and see the editing and who has authored it etc. Cath has been using wiki pages in teaching for 5-6 years now. An example of this is that she will set a series of subject related questions to trigger interest amongst the students. Using the questions as a starting point they then research and put together their own 'Wikipedia' on the specific subject. This is not really about the students discovering 'what they don't know' but more about realising there *are* things they don't know about. So it should act as a trigger for them to pursue further research and ideas.

In her use of VLEs to support learning Cath has started to put in place cross-cohort communication, where students are invited (and if agreeable give consent) for their entries to be 'left behind' and viewed by subsequent cohorts. This gives cohorts of students the capacity to engage with their previous and subsequent peers. Built in is a very clear record of who has contributed what. Cath uses a Twitter feed on the front page of every module which allows her students to tweet things of interest by inserting a certain hashtag in their tweets; she is finding that previous year's students are continuing to the twitter stream and thus communicate with the subsequent cohort.

### **Linda Lewis: a demonstration of the School's customised Blackboard home page**

Art, Design and Architecture have developed a predominantly image-based web page that is used as both a gateway to the Blackboard site and a notice board of current activities across the School e.g. competitions, Library blog. In keeping with the School's specialist areas and to engage with student and staff it is designed to be visually appealing with one of the aims being to promote a culture of community. To keep it of interest to users and because of the 'notice board' aspect it is updated on a regular basis. Via the page all students can access subject specific resource modules; this is to encourage the use of and sharing of resources across courses and disciplines.