

What are VLE's good for?: resource overview

Collection: Online teaching

Learning outcomes

By the end of this task you or your students will have been introduced to some of the key concepts and definitions underlying e-learning / technology enhanced learning. Further, you will have had a chance to either discuss with colleagues or reflect individually on how different e-learning tools are used with students and the successes and pitfalls encountered while doing so. The exercises could be useful as a starting point in establishing gaps in knowledge and understanding within the group or personally and could potentially assist in the planning of further training and development.



Overview

"I was just interested. I was really interested in developing something that complemented face to face learning and teaching." Julie Raby, Head of Cultural & Critical Studies, York St John University

VLE's (Virtual Learning Environments) and e-learning in general can be a tricky subject to discuss with academics in English studies. Whilst most English academics now acknowledge the tremendous benefits that 'IT' in its wider sense has brought to the administration of students, courses and departments as well as the management and production of research, many still regard the use of any technology (hardware or software) for teaching and learning with a degree of scepticism. This scepticism is often related to perceptions that teaching online takes a significant amount of time and effort

and that the time spent on developing online learning has insufficient pedagogical benefits to be worthwhile.

In addition there are technical and support barriers still to be overcome both on the side of staff and of students. Institutional IT provision may be 'perceived' as lacking in quality, speed or reliability (even though this may not be the case or may have been the case a few years before) . E-learning support too can be an issue, particularly when busy staff may not be proficient in multimedia production and editing and are reliant on some kind of central provision for many aspects of the e-learning production process like encoding podcasts or producing multimedia simulations etc. How much responsibility should the individual practitioner take on? Does this responsibility actually restrict the potential for e-learning?

These negative perceptions of e-learning are not to be ignored but rather should be dealt with head-on when examining the potential benefits to be gained from using aspects of e-learning in the teaching mix. Exercises like the two described here give audiences a chance to discuss openly the thoughts and feelings they may have about the ways technology can be used in educational contexts. Sometimes the mere act of articulating fears and anxieties can be cathartic!

VLEs

A Virtual Learning Environment or VLE is a useful tool to use when getting started with online learning as part of your teaching mix. Simply defined as a place where 'online interactions of various kinds take place between learners and tutors' , these interactions are facilitated by a password-protected suite of commonly used e-learning software tools with a consistency of layout, design and branding (which may or may not be to your taste) that can enable you to start trying out new pedagogical approaches in your teaching.

VLEs of all kinds are almost ubiquitous in UK Higher and Further Education today and increasingly in the primary and secondary sectors too so most academics will, undoubtedly, have one available now from their desktop. Your students may also have experienced them in some form in their previous educational lives (VLEs are used extensively in Secondary and Further Education too). It is this availability as well as the



2 | *This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.*

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support systems designed to assist you in using it, that makes the VLE such a useful tool in your teaching repertoire.

Web 2.0 and its implications

In an online world that is increasingly dominated by the new generation of freely available 'social software tools', user-generated and user-controlled.e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, some may wonder whether the VLE's days are numbered. Some have advocated the notion of 'loosely coupled' teaching where a variety of tools are brought together to enable student learning. Whilst this may bring tangible benefits for some, particularly advanced users, the advantages of using the VLE provided by your institution in terms of convenience, support, student authentication (single sign-on), reliability and the monitoring tools available outweigh any major disadvantages particularly if you are just getting started with online learning.

Links & References

This 5 minute clip produced by the University of New South Wales looks at the pros and cons of using VLE's vs software and websites on the open web.



Activities within this resource

- What is a VLE and why use it?: group activity
- What is a VLE and why use it?: individual activity



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Resources in the Online teaching Collection

- Online teaching: introduction to the collection
- **What are VLE's good for?: resource overview (*you are here)**
 - What is a VLE and why use it?: group activity
 - What is a VLE and why use it?: individual activity
- The design of online activities in English Studies: resource overview
 - Evaluating online activities in English Studies: group activity
 - Evaluating online activities in English Studies: individual activity
- Designing learning with new media: resource overview
 - Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: group activity
 - Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: individual activity
 - Designing an online activity in English Studies: group activity
 - Designing an online activity in English Studies: individual activity
- Teaching with digital archives: resource overview
 - Teaching with digital archives: group activity
 - Teaching with digital archives: individual activity
- Online discussion in English Studies: resource overview
 - Should online discussion be assessed?: group activity
 - Should online discussion be assessed?: individual activity
- Workshopping online: resource overview
 - Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: group activity
 - Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: individual activity

