USING THE VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT CLASSROOM TEACHING

ACTIVITIES

Prior to the activities discussed here, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was not being used in support of any module on our part-time programs (MSc Gas Turbine Control, MSc Safety Critical Systems Engineering, EngD). All modules had two web pages:

- A "Handbook" page with the module specification and reading list (publicly visible)
- A "course" page with informal notes and material to support assessment (visible to students enrolled in the module)

The goal of the trial activities was to assess the suitability of the VLE as a support for the classroom teaching. No online-only teaching or assessment was included in these activities.

The context of the activities was a generally negative attitude towards the VLE by teaching staff. The main concerns appeared to be related to usability of the VLE and ability of the VLE to support material currently hosted on web pages. Accordingly, the main issues being studied were:

- Difficulty for staff in using the VLE to support classroom teaching
- Difficulty for students in accessing material using the VLE
- Value added to classroom teaching by using the VLE

VLE content was prepared for two modules. These were Safety Management Systems (SMSY) and Through-Life Safety (TLSA). I (Andrew Rae) was the module owner for each module, and I was assisted by other teaching staff. Both of these modules ran in one-week intensive mode (i.e. the students were present in York for a single week of full time teaching, followed by six weeks to respond to an open assessment).

The VLE was used for:

- Static pages with course information and links to materials
- Regularly updated pages with links to supporting material, worked solutions etc.
- Boards for the students to post material and hold discussions
- A page hosting the assessment material
- A board for the students to ask questions about the assessment and receive answers from the teaching staff
- Video recordings of each of the lectures, recorded during the week the module ran

LECTURER EXPERIENCE

For SMSY lectures were recorded using Computer-Science department equipment, setup by the lecturers. The quality of these recordings was low, and there was a large amount of work involved in post-processing of the video (more than the amount of time spent actually lecturing).

For TLSA the audio-visual services staff set up a video camera and microphone recording directly into Camtasia – this allows power-point slide transitions to be recorded alongside the audio and video. This was a little hit-and-miss – there was no guarantee that any given lecture would be successfully recorded with suitable sound

quality. However, the majority of lectures were recorded with sufficient quality to be made available to students without post-processing.

The amount of work to set up each module was about the same as setting up a web-page. There is a delay in setting up any new module on the VLE – an online request form needs to be filled out, and it can take up to a day for the module area to appear. Students enrolled in a module are automatically enrolled in any VLE area set up for that module. Students not enrolled in a module (e.g. CPD students) need to be manually added. This is straightforward if they have an electronic identity at the university (CPD students all do).

A unexpected positive for the lecturers was being able to track which resources students were actually using. Whilst this can be done in a crude fashion by web-page usage statistics, the VLE keeps a clear record of which resources each student has accessed.

STUDENT USE OF THE VLE

Students were not required to use the VLE (except to sign-in once to check that they could access it).

Students voluntarily used the VLE to:

- Post their own worked answers to exercises (either saved files from SmartBoards or photos of whiteboards)
- Watch recordings of the lectures
- Ask questions about the assessment

Students were very positive about the ability to watch lectures as a form of revision or if they missed a lecture session.

Students expressed concern about inconsistent use of the VLE – it was important to students that they accessed information for modules in a standardised manner. Whilst they understood that the use of the VLE on two modules was a trial, they thought in the longer term that all modules should use the VLE, or no modules should use the VLE.

ACTION POINTS

1. We are continuing to explore recording of lectures for the MSc modules. The in-room setup produces videos suitable for re-watching lectures (for revision or if a lecture is missed). The recordings are not suitable as stand-alone productions (e.g. as online-only material).
2. To solve the problem of a standard interface for students, we are using the VLE for all MSc SCSE modules. Most modules contain a single resource (a link to a web page) allowing lecturers within the programme not to use the VLE, whilst still providing a common interface.
3. We are considering using some of the other VLE features, in particular for online individual or group exercises. Pre-reading material for intensive-mode modules has received positive feedback, so pre-module formative exercises are a logical next step.
4. The VLE and associated technical support is currently quite mature. Anything that can't be done within the VLE environment can still be done on web pages stored within or linked from the VLE, so there are very few constraints on how material can be presented.