

BRIFING PAPER

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VLEs
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Introduction

Offering a virtual learning environment (VLE) has come to be seen as a magic bullet – the solution to many of the complex problems facing education in the current Internet exploiting environment. Certainly, for the current generation of students, the virtual world is hardly ‘new technology’. Being constantly in touch socially and accessing information instantly through gadgets as immediate as a mobile telephone are as much a part of daily life as electricity or hot water. But can we assume that this is true for everyone, and does one size really fit all when it comes to VLEs?

Looking at surveys where researchers have actually spoken to students about what they need and want from a VLE yields some interesting considerations.

General concern

Will I really be able to learn this way?

Firstly, despite the ease with which students incorporate computers, the internet and other digital technologies into their lives, in the context of learning the match is not as comfortable as one might expect. Many studies report that students still have difficulties with internet access and are nervous about their ability to use technology for study.

For some students, simple issues such as familiarity with the keyboard and typing skills may be stumbling blocks where activities require, for instance, simultaneous chat or long entries in online journals or portfolios. In contrast, for many students, familiarity with ‘new’ technologies often has its roots in computer gaming – an environment where trial and error is the most common way to learn. This is usually very different from the way in which traditional learning experiences are designed.

What should I expect?

The new learning medium sets up a different environment where expectations are uncertain. Students feel that they do not always have clear guidance on how quickly they can expect instant responses to queries, how often they are required to look into the VLE to check on activity, and so on. These matters are often more clearly spelled out for conventional timetables, lectures, seminars and tutorials. Indeed, even if they are not, students have a certain ‘vision’ of what traditional education is like and can find their way around the system more easily than when faced with a new, electronic learning environment.

In addition to the general issues which emerge from studies looking at how students themselves view an online learning experience, a number of interesting contrasts become evident. Balancing these contrasting needs can be challenging for those developing the learning environment.

What problem is the VLE solving?

The importance of being clear on this question can be illustrated by looking at the contrasting needs of distance learners and students in a traditional environment.

Approaching a VLE from the point of view of a distance learner seems an easy task – clearly, the technology provides students with the opportunity to communicate with one another and with their tutors in a far more contextual way than has previously been possible – helping to reduce the ‘loneliness of the long distance student’ which has for so long been characteristic of this form of study. These students appreciate the fact that, with discussions and activities happening asynchronously, they can participate in them flexibly at times and places which suit them. In addition, they can work on materials and assessments at their own pace.

For on-campus students, there seems little point in holding online discussions and doing online group work when they can meet up and do these things in person. Indeed, it might be that just as much learning goes on in heated discussions over the canteen table as does in the lecture theatre itself. What benefit can a VLE provide for these students?

The responses they give in various surveys are that they value advance warning of the areas which will be covered in lectures, so that if they want to, they can develop some ideas around the concepts to be discussed. They value having copies of the lecturers’ slides and notes as reminders once the lecture is complete (and do not necessarily see them as substitutes for going to the lectures – PowerPoint slides generally make little sense if one has not listened to the talking that accompanied them). It follows from this, that on-campus students prefer their VLE information to be arranged in a similar timeframe and framework to their lecture timetable, rather than in the looser, more flexible way that off-campus learners might prefer.

Achieving a qualification or enrichment?

This is another contrast which has implications for VLE design. Students who are focused primarily on successfully passing examinations have a different view on what they need from those who are more focused on gaining personal knowledge, skills or experience. This distinction may seem to separate, perhaps, undergraduate and postgraduate students, or young and mature students (also valuable contrasts to explore), but this is not always the case. MBA students, for instance, although postgraduate, are often particularly ‘qualification focused’.

Needs of specific student groups

What do the students at these different ends of the learning outcome spectrum seek in at VLE? Students who are examination-focused may tend towards wanting their VLE to contain numerous variations on examination questions, past examination papers with exemplar answers and plenty of opportunity to practise answering questions in a similar vein to those which may be asked in an examination. Students who are this particular stage in their educational journey are reluctant to participate in any activities which do not contribute directly to some form of assessment. These students do not necessarily want to be provided with enrichment opportunities – they want to focus on the task in hand.

In contrast, students focused on practical outcomes or more intrinsic goals may look for opportunities to expand their knowledge, to research around questions beyond what is directly examination related, to participate in master classes or discussions with practitioners in their field or tease out the philosophical arguments around issues simply for the enrichment of their knowledge and learning experience.

Most students will, indeed, have times when they fall in one camp or the other, and this will dictate the way in which they view their required participation in particular features of a VLE.

The implications for VLE design

All of these themes require careful consideration by those designing online learning experiences for students. Many of them can be relieved by making clear to students what the additional, and possibly to them hitherto invisible, benefits are of using an online learning medium. Where on-campus students are required to do group work online, if it is possible, include in the group students who are off-campus. In this way, on-campus students receive fresh insights which they could not access in their conventional surroundings, and off-campus students are drawn into the learning community, which is one of their needs.

For those students who are focused on examination results, robust testing, with the ability to randomise questions from a broad item bank, and detailed feedback are crucial. If detailed materials are also provided online, links can be provided directly into the materials to assist with revision. These students may also find it useful to have some kind of profiling tool which allows them to measure their progress against learning outcomes and/or against previous test scores.

For students who are more focused on intrinsic personal and practical goals, a portfolio tool which allows them to prepare and/or store evidence of learning, rather than repeated testing, may be the way forward. The ability to create simulations and embed activities in other applications (such as creating and running an Excel formula within the learning environment) provides these students with the kind of learning experiences they can identify with and take forward into a working environment. Detailed signposting and clear, consistent structure across all the elements of the VLE will allow both on-campus and off-campus students to relate their on-line learning to off-line activities.

A VLE is no more likely to please all the people all the time than any other learning experience. However, to get as close as possible to providing something which will allow learners of all types to achieve their goals, it is essential that the tools which are used to create the VLE are capable of providing the richest possible environment, but also easily allow designers to switch on and off features.

The essential message is to know your target audience and understand what value the VLE is adding for them. Then craft a virtual learning environment that will fit, rather than trying to fit them into one all-purpose institutional environment. The more flexibility you have in your VLE, content and support services, the better able you are to launch and then evolve your learning designs to achieve this.

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Conclusion



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