

JISC Briefing Document

Background to the JISC Circular 05/06: Learner Experiences of e-Learning

1. Background and context

The 'Learner Experiences of e-Learning' theme of the e-Learning and Pedagogy Strand¹ of the JISC e-Learning Programme, is concerned with the learner perspective on the role of technology in learning. This complements the work being undertaken in the Design for Learning theme² which focuses on the perspectives of practitioners.

The work of the 'Learner Experiences of e-Learning' theme recognises that learners have a different perspective from their tutors on the technologies available to them, and their use in learning situations. Learners' perspectives are likely to be influenced by their expectations, motivations, prior experiences and attitudes towards technology and learning. In addition, we recognise that learners are a diverse group living complex lives with different priorities, preferences and approaches to learning and different requirements for support. Their relationships to technology are constantly changing. They make use of technologies – and learning opportunities – they encounter in their daily lives as well as those offered to them by institutions. By furthering our understanding of how learners experience learning with technology, we can make recommendations about how best to support them. We can inform the development of systems, processes and environments which support personalisation, lifelong learning, adaptability, flexibility and accessibility. We can also make recommendations to learners themselves.

Together the two themes of the e-Learning and Pedagogy Strand will draw together the practitioner and learner perspectives to offer guidance on effective pedagogical practice in context.

2. Aims

The aims of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme are derived from the expressed needs of the other JISC strands of work, and the research, development and practitioners communities as represented by the e-Learning and Pedagogy Experts Group. The aims are to:

- Review and investigate how learners experience and participate in learning in technology-rich environments.
- Make recommendations for those involved in the support of student learning (including practitioners, support staff and institutional managers) on how best to support learners, based on our understanding of the diverse needs, experiences and preferences of learners.
- Help developers to design systems that support a wide range of learning tasks/interactions, meet different learner needs and enable positive learning experiences.
- Investigate the strategies, beliefs and intentions of learners who are effective in learning in technology-rich environments.
- Develop methodologies for eliciting the learner experience and promote learner involvement in evaluations which practitioners can use to inform their designing for learning.

3. Learners' experiences of e-learning

A review of the literature funded in the first phase of work under this theme found that the learner perspective is under represented in e-learning research generally³ and similar findings

¹ For information on the e-Learning and Pedagogy strand visit www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning_pedagogy.html

² For information on the Design for Learning programme visit www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_designlearn.html

³ Sharpe, R., Benfield, G., Lessner, E., & De Cicco, E. (2005) Learner Scoping Study: Final Report, available from http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html.

are reported in reviews of specific technologies such as interactive whiteboards⁴ and e-portfolios⁵. In response to the lack of learner centred research, the first phase of projects has recorded and collected learners' individual narratives about their experiences. The emerging findings of these projects and other current research⁶ are helping us to understand and conceptualise the complexity of learners' lives and experiences. Some of these themes are outlined below.

- Learners are living complex and time-constrained lives. In these circumstances efficient and flexible access to learning materials, experts and communities are becoming increasingly important. Learners appreciate flexible access to course-related resources.
- Learners make frequent use of technology both at home and within their institution. They use the internet as the first port of call for information in their lives and expect to be able to locate and download relevant resources for their study.
- Similarly, many learners are used to establishing and maintaining frequent technology mediated connections and expect frequent and responsive communications in relation to their study.
- Personalisation and choice are core elements of technology use in learners' lives that they expect to transfer to their study.
- There is evidence emerging of an 'underworld' of informal learning which is not expected or supported by the institution or its courses but may be enabled and sustained by use of technology.

Some of these issues appear to be particularly important for some groups of students. For example:

- flexible access and adaptability of tools and environments are particularly useful for students with disabilities;
- students with extensive work and family commitments have a particular need for anytime, anyplace access to resources, and flexible communication opportunities;
- learners with cultural barriers to accessing formal learning (e.g. for whom English is not a first language) may have those difficulties enhanced – or alleviated – when access is mediated through learning technologies;
- learners who are based away from campuses, e.g. in a workplace, community or field setting, may gain specific benefits from mobile and wireless technologies;
- skilled and experienced technology users may expect not only to find online resources but to engage in online publication (e.g. via wikis and blogs) and participate in a community of authors.

The experiences of these groups are still under-represented and require further exploration. Individual students may of course have multiple 'group' memberships that help to define their experience of technology, and these interactions may also be of interest.

The first phase of studies attempted to determine factors that enable students to be effective in learning with technology. The studies to date have suggested that elements of effectiveness might include how learners: cope with the emotional quality of the experience of learning with technology; fit learning around their life; operate in online social networks and communities; conceive of and understand the role of technology in learning. However, these studies offered only a snapshot of each learner's experience. It has been recommended that

⁴ Smith, H. J., Higgins, S., Wall, K. & Miller, J. (2005) Interactive whiteboards: boon or bandwagon? A critical review of the literature, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*. 21 (2), 91-101.

⁵ Tosh, D., Penny Light, T., Fleming, K. & Haywood, J. (2005) Engagement with electronic portfolios: Challenges from the student perspective. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*. 31 (3),

⁶ Sharpe, R., Benfield, G., Roberts, G. & Francis, R (2006) The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice undertaken for the Higher Education Academy, available from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/4884.htm> .

follow-up studies should look at a longer period in the life of a learner, in order to understand how learners' perceptions of technology and of learning change through key experiences such as the transition to Higher Education, or the introduction of new learning environments and technologies.

Finally, learning for our constituents in post-16 education increasingly takes place within a context of designed learning environments, managed assessment, and institutional technology agendas. It is not yet clear what impact these contextual factors have on the student experience, although it has been suggested that both courses and institutions may need to change radically if they are to support truly transformative learning experiences. It is important that any such developments evolve through an iterative process which makes use of student feedback and which involves learners in the design process.

4. Phase two developments

It is important that projects funded in the next phase build on and extend the findings and methodologies from the first phase.

4.1 Key questions

The key questions for the next phase are derived from the findings of the first phase of projects and the discussion of these findings with the Pedagogy Experts Group (see www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning_experts.html).

- a) How do specific groups of students - such as students with disabilities, students with work and/or family commitments, international learners, refugees and work based learners - experience learning with technology?
- b) What is the experience of highly skilled online communicators and networkers (defined as learners with existing skills, aptitudes and habits of online networking and information gathering, which they have not necessarily acquired through formal learning)? How can learners' existing skills be developed and exploited more effectively?
- c) How do learners' experiences change through their learning journey, particularly at points of transition such as induction?
- d) What are the critical choices that learners make about when, where and how to study and how do these influence their experience of e-learning? (Learners might choose to study at home or in the library (per session of study); in a work-based context or at college (per course of study). These choices are likely to affect their experience of learning, and of e-learning, e.g. influencing how they communicate with their tutors and peers.)
- e) How do learners make use of technology for learning in ways that are not expected or supported by their institution?
- f) How are learners personalising and adapting their learning tools and environments?
- g) How do students conceive of the role of technology in their learning? Is there a relationship between students' conceptions of learning with technology and their success?
- h) What, if any, is the impact of institutional strategies and course level practices - such as widening participation, developing skills for global citizenship, accessibility, designing for difference - on the learner experience?

4.2 Expected methodology

The previous studies have been successful in eliciting learner narratives through interviews and in identifying uses of technology through surveys and logs. Several methodological developments were pursued during this phase. For example, it was decided to use artefacts actually produced by learners as a means of triggering conversations about their habits of technology use. Phenomenological techniques pioneered in healthcare were used to structure interviews. It was also decided to focus on describing 'successful' or 'effective' e-learners and their contexts, with 'effectiveness' defined not simply in terms of assessment outcomes but

relative to learners' own goals and self-perceptions, and the difference technology has made to their experience of learning. Projects funded under the next phase will be expected to build on these techniques for eliciting the learner experience.

While understanding the learner experience is a demanding, intensive and qualitative research process, it is important that tools are also developed which can be easily adopted by practitioners, enabling them to explore the perspectives of their own learners and to use these in their design and development work.

4.3 Expected outcomes

Outcomes of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning projects should support the effective development and use of learning environments and inform the development of the next generation of tools and services funded through the other areas of work under the JISC e-Learning Programme.

Outcomes of these projects will be of widespread interest to practitioners, developers and policy-makers in e-learning. All projects must demonstrate awareness of the audience for their work and expect to work with the Support and Synthesis project to develop their outputs into a form that can be communicated effectively to these stakeholders.

5. Learner experiences of e-learning: phase one projects

Bidders should be familiar with the methodology, findings and outputs of the projects funded under the first phase of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme. Proposals should indicate clearly how they intend to make use of or collaborate with the work of these previous projects. Details of all the projects and their outputs are available from the Learner Experiences of e-Learning webpage at www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html

5.1 Scoping, Support and Synthesis project

The Scoping study began the work of the strand with a literature based review of the learner experience. This found that the learner perspective on e-learning has been largely overlooked in favour of teacher focused evaluations, often of specific courses and/or technologies. The scoping study report made recommendations for the research questions and methodology of the following projects. The outcomes from the Scoping study are available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html. The project is producing a synthesis report and briefing papers for different stakeholders and this will be available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html in October 2006.

5.2 The Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX) project

The aim of the LEX project was to elicit reflective individual narratives of learning and explore the strategies e-learners adopt in order to cope with the demands of technology and learning in relation to other aspects of their lives. The LEX team conducted individual interviews and focus groups with a total of 55 learners. The team used the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to capture and explore meanings that individuals assign to their own experiences. Artefacts such as learning logs or course materials were used during interviews to stimulate recall and instigate discussion of learning strategies and behaviours. The project has produced a final report of the findings and a separate report on the methodology used is available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html.

5.3 Experiences of e-Learning, exploring subject differences (LearnerXP) project

The primary aim of the LearnerXP project is to distil subject discipline differences in the use of technology in learning. The project is working with four Higher Education Academy Subject Centres (Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science; Economics; Information and Computer Sciences; Languages and Linguistics) to recruit students from higher education. Participants have completed a survey, a two week audio log and individual interviews to gain an understanding of the settings in which learners use technology to support their learning. The project will report its findings at the end of September 2006 and reports will be available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html.

5.4 The Learner's Voice

A series of five video clips of learners from further, higher and adult education settings, exploring what makes an effective e-learner have been produced. The clips will be available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html in October 2006 and will be included in a JISC publication on The Learner's Voice planned for spring 2007.

6. Relevant activities under the Design for Learning Programme

JISC is funding a number of projects under the Design for Learning Programme which aims to further develop the community's understanding of the principles that inform the design of effective learning activities which involve the use of technology. Further information about the programme is available from www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_designlearn.html

6.1 Models of Practice (MOD4L)

The primary outcome of this project is to develop a practitioner-focused resource describing a range of 16-30 exemplary practice models of learning activities with technology and indicating how these may be applied in practice. Information about the project is available from www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/mod4l/

7. Relevant activities under the e-Learning Capital Programme

The e-Learning Capital programme is an £11.36 million investment to support the sector in harnessing the potential of e-learning to support lifelong learners. A particular area of investigation will be around providing a personalised learning experience, meeting the needs of individual learners in a range of settings through the use of technologies such as e-portfolios and technologies which support assessment and collaboration. The programme also includes work on how technology can facilitate the more sophisticated administration processes needed for this kind of flexible provision.

A number of activities within this programme will be investigating the learner's experience of using technology in particular the Higher Education (HE) in Further Education (FE) projects. There projects will be implementing and piloting e-learning technologies within one or more HE courses delivered in one or more FE colleges.

Further information about the e-Learning Capital Programme is available from <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elcapital.html>