

The University of Glamorgan

Smoothies: the recipe for effective blended learning

The University

The University of Glamorgan attracts over 21,000 students and provides a diverse range of programmes through campuses in South Wales and its world-wide networks. Created to support the University's commitment to continuous improvement in leading edge learning and teaching, *Smoothies*, a blended learning support pack, has provided a special impetus for the development of blended learning throughout the institution.

Blended learning provides the opportunity to facilitate the delivery of teaching and learning through a combination of different modes of delivery and styles. For example, blended learning can combine face-to-face teaching and learning with the effective use of electronic media ranging from PowerPoint Presentations and emails to video conferencing, instant messaging and virtual chat facilities. The aim of blended learning is to improve the teaching and learning experience through the selection of the most appropriate blend of modes and styles relevant, for example, to the student cohort, the learning environment and subject area.

'*Smoothies* provided a focus on the objectives and outcomes of teaching, rather than the traditional reliance on technology or content'. **Haydn Blackey, Head of Learning and Teaching**

The catalyst for development

The JISC e-Learning programme's communications and dissemination activities provided the catalyst for the development of *Smoothies* plus a wealth of essential resources. This enabled the Glamorgan team to produce the content of the pack, as **Jacqui Neale, Senior Learning Technology Advisor**, explains: 'Attending a JISC e-Learning programme dissemination event provided the inspiration for *Smoothies*. The Effective Practice Guides, templates and information on the e-Learning programme pages of the JISC web site were an invaluable source of information for the development of the project'.

Planning for success

A thorough planning process underpinned the development and implementation of the initiative. The team responsible for *Smoothies*, Haydn Blackey, Head of Learning and Teaching, Jacqui Neale, Senior Learning Technology Advisor, and Sue Burnett, Team Leader Facilitation and Publishing, utilised their extensive learning design, development and editorial experience to achieve a number of key objectives. For example:

- The coordination of existing information and materials into one 'overarching resource'
- The development of messages that clearly demonstrated the positive impact that blended learning can have on the student experience, personal development and within the institution as a whole.

The University's in house graphic design team made an 'invaluable contribution' by producing the pack in a cost effective and timely manner.

'It was so important to develop a narrative that would tell a story appropriate to the needs of users and provide information and materials that would motivate and engage staff. The name *Smoothies* came as a moment of inspiration and provided us with a clear and concise concept that emphasised the "blended" in blended learning'. **Sue Burnett, Team Leader Facilitation and Publishing**

Curriculum context

'The team developed *Smoothies* to fundamentally change and enhance the delivery and experience of our curriculum on an institutional-wide basis and to support flexibility regarding how and when programmes are delivered. The initiative supported key corporate objectives such as enhancing the student experience, improving teaching and learning through more consistent and effective use of technology-enhanced learning and to build the University's capacity in this area. The initiative also provides a feature of distinction for the University'.

Haydn Blackey, Head of Learning and Teaching

The challenge

In response to the major challenge to engage University staff with the initiative, the team developed a multi-channelled communications strategy, which included:

- Endorsement from the University's senior management team
- Recruitment of Faculty-based Blended Learning Champions
- Engagement with the Students' Union
- Distribution of a printed copy of the pack throughout the University
- Workshops and road shows

The team has ensured that *Smoothies* has a long term legacy through initiatives such as:

- An online video via the University's web site
- *Smoothies Monthly Specials*- updates which focus on specific aspects of blended learning
- A PDF version of the pack available to download from the University's website
- Integration of the initiative into the University's staff development and staff induction programmes

Supporting the individual and the institution

The development and implementation of *Smoothies* focused on supporting a series of objectives and outcomes which were designed to benefit both the individual and the institution. For example:

- To provide a framework to increase blended learning throughout the institution
- To inspire and motivate staff regarding the benefits of blended learning
- To enhance student centred learning

- To raise awareness of the value and positive impact of blended learning at a senior management level

‘Initially staff were unsure why they had received the pack. After reviewing the information, I realised *Smoothies* could provide assistance in a range of areas. I have since utilised the information to support the learning and teaching on a current undergraduate programme and to help launch a distance learning MSc programme. I have also used *Smoothies* to implement a student IT induction programme and to support my own personal development’.

Dr Trevor Price, Senior Lecturer in Sustainable Risk Management

Making an impact: measuring success

It is clear from the feedback gathered by the Glamorgan team that *Smoothies* has made a significant contribution to the development of blended learning within the University and has played a pivotal role in influencing styles and delivery of teaching and learning at an individual and institutional level. *Smoothies*, the evidence suggests, has also enhanced the student experience and actively supported one the University’s corporate aims: to be at the forefront of leading-edge teaching and learning. Anecdotal feedback gained from within the University suggests that 80% of staff are now actively participating in blended learning.

There were also some unexpected outcomes for the team. For example:

- Staff involved in a number of more traditional subject areas, where blended learning did not appear to be a key priority, have since engaged in the process to the benefit of both staff and students
- The University has been contacted by two American-based institutions, which have requested more information on the *Smoothies* development process and outcomes
- There has been a “significant” increase in staff development activity
- There have been enhanced levels of team working

Web statistics collated by the team, recorded that there have been over 8,500 downloads of the guide and related resources between January 2007 and April 2010.

This evidence has been underpinned by feedback from an evaluation report commissioned by the team to provide analysis of the implications, challenges and opportunities of the increased use of blended learning within the University.

Feedback from the report highlighted that blended learning within the University had been given a ‘special impetus’ since the inception of the project and that a combination of drivers, such as technical innovation, organisation (and business developments) or characteristics of the needs and demands of the individual learner or lecturer, has supported ‘enduring’ and ‘palatable’ change within the University.

The report also identified the need for continued development to respond to on-going challenges and recommended that any new initiatives should recognise the importance of cultural change within the University and also address the ‘evolving’ capabilities of staff and learners.

Comments from staff, who contributed to the evaluation report, included:

‘Such methods have the potential to bring a colourful and exciting approach to subjects that can be ‘traditional’ or ‘dry’. In addition to this, the use of such techniques enables me to encourage my learners to develop skill.....’

‘A balance between technology and traditional methods is key’.

‘Using technology simply for the sake of using (it) is a hollow experience for students and staff’.

‘There are always going to be courses or aspects of courses where it does not make sense to integrate technology into the classroom’.

‘Generates a good level of attendance and willingness to engage in the learning process’.

‘I am now much more organised in the way I teach. I now set out a teaching plan for the whole year for every module I teach’.

Making the most of resources from the JISC e-Learning programme

The resources available through the JISC e-Learning programme, for example, the programme’s printed and on-line publications, provided significant support for the development of the project, as well as a source of inspiration for the content of *Smoothies*.

The team acknowledged the JISC e-Learning programme’s pedagogy materials as the ‘foundation for the content of the pack’ and highlighted the invaluable insights provided by ‘Effective Practice with e-Learning’, (JISC, 2004). Effective utilisation of these resources, including the adaptation of a number of the effective practice templates, for example, those templates covering planning, reflection and case study development, enabled the team to develop *Smoothies* as a practical and beneficial learning and development experience for staff throughout the University.

Links

<http://lcss.glam.ac.uk/blendedlearning/smoothies/>

Relevant JISC Resources

Effective Practice with e-Learning (2004) -

www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/effectivepracticelearning.pdf

Effective Practice in a Digital Age (2009) – www.jisc.ac.uk/practice

Effective Practice Planner - www.jisc.ac.uk/resourceexchange

Pedagogy Case Study Templates and Effective Practice Evaluator -

www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearningpedagogy/templates.aspx