

Scope

This guide:

- outlines the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies
- highlights what learners are saying about their use of their own and institutionally provided technologies to support their learning
- synthesises the main findings about learners' technology use from the studies
- makes institution-level recommendations for supporting technology use

Who this guide is for

This guide is for senior managers in the post-16 education sector, with particular relevance to those in further education. It may also be of interest to e-learning researchers, and teaching and support staff involved with e-learning applications.

Background

The JISC e-Learning Programme has funded a number of projects with a focus on understanding the learner's perspective on the role of technology in learning, to inform the effective development and use of learning environments, tools and services. The studies include:

- **Learner Scoping study.** This literature review investigated learners' experiences of e-learning and their needs and expectations for the future, and made recommendations for subsequent studies of learners' experiences of e-learning across the post-16 education sector (Sharpe et al., 2005)
- **The Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX) study.** This study explored the learner's perspective on e-learning by gathering rich data from 55 learner participants from across the post-16 education sector (Creanor et al., 2006)

- **Student Experiences of Technologies (LXP) study.** Conducted in association with four Higher Education Academy subject centres, this study focused on learners' experiences of using technologies for learning, with an emphasis on investigating differences between subject disciplines (Conole et al., 2006)
- **The learner's voice.** Five video case studies from across the post-16 sector illustrate learners' feelings and beliefs about technology and the role it plays in their lives and their learning (JISC, 2006)

Outcomes of these and subsequent projects in Phase 2 of the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme are being used to inform the development of the next generation of learning tools and services funded through the e-Learning Programme.

The LEX study provides relevant data for further education institutions, since it draws on focus groups and interviews with a range of learners, including those in further education.

However, due to the nature of the research methods used, it is difficult to generalise from the findings. Therefore, only themes which are supported by all the studies in the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme are reported here.

Themes and recommendations

Variations in skills and experience

The individuality of learners' relationships with technology is evident throughout the studies, indicating that care must be taken to avoid stereotyping when seeking to define the use of e-learning by any group of learners – for example, typcasting younger learners as 'digital natives', or adult learners competent in the use of software in the workplace as likely to have fewer problems as e-learners.

Recommendations for managers in post-16 institutions (FE)

Guide 2

In fact, the variation in ability in both ICT and e-learning skills that learners of all ages bring to their studies will remain a challenge for institutions for some time to come. The level of ICT skills among learners on any particular course could vary, for example, from complete novice to highly experienced. This becomes a particularly acute issue when courses are partially or wholly delivered online, or when software use is prescribed in assignments:

“I thought it would be OK because I’m used to doing word-processing ... and I’m really fast at typing and things so that wouldn’t pose a problem for me at all. What I didn’t realise was that I would need to go onto the internet and so I was feeling quite confident, but now I don’t feel as confident about that.”

Further education social care day-release learner: LEX report [Creanor et al., 2006, p.10]

“...there is a definite gap between what we need and what we are given, where we have to find out how to use the technology for ourselves, which is for most of us a case of trial and error.” Gary, 21 year old medical student: LXP report [Conole et al., 2006, p.30]

Skills in e-learning may be equally variable. These include what is often referred to as ‘digital literacy’: the retrieval, management and evaluation of information from online sources, ethical and academically appropriate uses of online content and collaborative activities, strategies for initiating and maintaining communication in asynchronous and synchronous environments for the purpose of learning, and skills in using software to create new content.

Use of Google™ and Wikipedia® was shown to be widespread among learners of all types and, while many learners in the studies use these resources critically, this level of expertise cannot be assumed to be universal. The LXP study shows that learners are aware of the need to triangulate between sources of information, but other learners show a tendency to bypass institutionally approved resources:

“... and if you want to know anything just open the Google and go right there and search anything, that’s a good thing.”

Focus group of adult ESOL learners: LEX report [Creanor et al., 2006, p.13]

An underworld of activity, in which learners circumvent institutional policies and provision to establish their own sources of information and channels of communication, is a striking finding from the JISC studies. A powerful argument therefore exists for an increased focus on training in digital literacy, especially in view of the growing number of learners under the age of 16 in further education colleges.

The JISC studies indicate the continuing importance of the institution’s role in providing access to technology

Digital divides

The studies also indicate disparities in learners’ access to technology and therefore their ability to achieve. Some international students have to make considerable adjustments when studying in a technology-rich context, since computers and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) may not have been so readily available in their home countries.

Of great concern is the growing disadvantage of those learners who do not have access to a computer with a fast broadband connection in their own homes and who cannot afford to buy personal technologies:

“When I need a computer, which I do quite a lot, I have to come on campus, I have no other choice. If I had a computer I think it would be easier and on average I would be spending more hours than I do on the internet ... also with the library, the demand for computers is very high, there’s peak hours where you can’t get a computer, it becomes so competitive.”

Dumisani, first year marketing student:
LEX report [Creanor et al., 2006, p.17]

“I use my laptop, I take it away, it’s attached to me. I couldn’t survive without it.”

Emma, undergraduate business student: LEX report [Creanor et al. 2006, p.13]

Because the studies also indicate that participating successfully in online learning increases learners’ self-esteem, inadequate computer access or IT support is detrimental in more ways than one.

Recommendations

The JISC studies indicate the continuing importance of the institution’s role in providing access to technology. Further education institutions should:

- investigate learners’ access to computers off campus at the same time as assessing their ICT skills during initial and diagnostic assessment
- develop strategies for prioritising on-campus support for learners with limited access to computers at home
- encourage the development of ICT components on a wider variety of courses, including those in basic skills
- review and update training for learning in a digital age, ensuring that all learners have equal access to guidance and support to enable them to use technology appropriately and effectively

... having a sense of control over their learning environment is increasingly important and relevant to learners

Learning in a digital age

The flexible nature of e-learning is seen as advantageous by learners of all ages in the studies. Adult part-time learners speak of using small blocks of time within their daily work and family schedule to learn online, and most learners had established support networks among their peers using a variety of communication technologies – for example, Skype™, texting or instant messaging.

But for some learners, technology has done a great deal more than make learning convenient. Technology has revolutionised their learning potential and opened doors to new forms of understanding. Online interactions and communication technologies have, in particular, brought new dimensions to their learning, developing their social and cognitive skills and allowing them to connect aspects of their world in ways that are unique to them:

“But something like this [the internet] I guess it expands all your horizons in completely different ways and helps you to apply academic stuff to everyday life and see where current affairs and things fit into the academic.” Emma, undergraduate business student: LEX report [Creanor et al., 2006, p.8]

“I wanted to see what kind of blogs were out there and just to really see what other things were available, never looked into that sort of thing on a PC before.”

Paul, mature undergraduate student: LEX report [Creanor et al., 2006, p.9]

Control and access

The value to learners of using their own personal applications of technology in their learning was evident throughout the studies. Yet institutional policies frequently control or block access to the software and tools learners use, having a detrimental effect on learning.

The growing number of learners under the age of 16 in further education may be seen as evidence of a continuing need to channel learners into using only institutionally provided and approved software. However, blocking or filtering social networking websites across all computers in the institution prevents lecturers from developing new and engaging ways of exploiting the potential of newer technologies – for example, using Flickr™ to share and discuss digital images of artwork or to record learning which takes place in a work-based environment, or setting up blogs and wikis to promote reflective learning. It also fails to take into account the widespread familiarity younger learners have with social software, particularly MySpace®, now with over 100 million accounts.

Recommendations for managers in post-16 institutions (FE)

Guide 2

The JISC studies also indicate powerfully that having a sense of control over their learning environment is increasingly important and relevant to learners, many of whom have access to a full range of digital technologies in the home:

‘Laura communicates with other students on her course through a range of social software applications available through the internet. MySpace.com – a web community – is a virtual space where Laura and her fellow students network.’ The learner’s voice video case study: Laura [JISC, 2006]

These findings suggest that institutions should keep their policies of access to software and tools under review to ensure that their provision remains appropriate and relevant in a rapidly changing social and technological environment.

Recommendations

The studies show that, to be an effective learner in a digital age, it is particularly beneficial to integrate personal and institutional technologies. Studying, researching, socialising, shopping, instant messaging and online chat can now be conducted more or less simultaneously.

Further education institutions should:

- review the value of wholesale blocking of social software as its use becomes more widely established in the community
- explore the potential to be found in audio recording revision materials in MP3 format for use on learners’ own mobile devices such as an iPod®
- refuse to marginalise or force underground learners’ legitimate uses of emerging technologies
- incorporate training for learning in a digital age into all programmes of study

Further information

DOPA, social networks and keeping young people safe, AoC NILTA <http://aocnilta.co.uk/2006/08/03/dopa>

Emerging technologies for learning, volume 2 (2007), Becta http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=rh&catcode=_re_rp_ap_03&rid=11380

Outcomes from the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes

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