JISC

JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning

Recommendations for IT managers and staff

GUIDE 5

Scope

This guide:

- outlines the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies
- highlights the key themes which emerged from the studies concerning technology provision and support
- makes recommendations for supporting learners' use of technology

Who this guide is for

This guide is for IT managers and IT staff in higher, further and adult and community education. It may also be of interest to learning technologists and other e-learning support staff involved in the development of 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.

Themes and recommendations

Learners rely on a wide range of technologies, which they adapt and personalise to their own needs. They expect technology to be available, accessible and usable.

These are the main findings that emerge from the studies:

- Considering the extent to which learners use their own technology to support informal learning, institutions should consider how they allow for, or even encourage, the integration of institutional and personal technologies. For example, learners would like to be able to cheaply and easily transfer data between home and institution and to personalise the technology provided by their institution
- Learners expect easy and consistent access to, and navigation through, institutionally provided information and services
- Learners still have a strong desire for training and support in information retrieval and evaluation skills
- Learners expect to be able to maintain contact with their institutions and their courses at all times via web services

- Institutions still need feedback about the challenges and barriers experienced by particular groups of learners, such as those with disabilities, those with work/family commitments, international learners and those without access to their own technology

Technology use is integrative and pervasive

> "I use a lot more technology in other aspects of my life. I listen to podcasts, watch digital video, take and edit photographs and regularly contribute to more than one blog."
> Language and communications undergraduate: LXP study [Conole et al., 2006, p. 63]

The learners' voices testify to the central role that technology plays in the social and educational experience of individuals in all areas of post-16 education. Learners rely on a wide range of technologies and expect to be able to mix and match available technologies. They see technology as just another tool to support their learning.

> "We've been brought up using new technologies, and introducing new ones to our way of work as new technologies appear, it's not a case of 'fitting around', it's just the way I work, using multiple methods, some 'traditional', some e-learning."
> Software engineering undergraduate: LXP study [Conole et al., 2006]

The LXP study reported that the top five technologies used by learners are email, internet/search, personal computer, word-processing software, instant messaging and the mobile phone.

The internet as the dominant information resource

> "For research stuff, it is hard to imagine life without the services of Google and all its offshoots." Multimedia computing undergraduate: LXP study [Conole et al., 2006, p. 66]

The internet is the first port of call for students when researching topics for their studies. Wikipedia® and Google™ were highlighted as preferred and ubiquitous information-retrieval tools, which are used before accessing discipline-specific or more focused resources.

Learners identified the absence of training to support them in using their tools of choice, particularly the use of the internet for information retrieval, and evaluation of electronic resources. They noted that tutors recommend different sources of information and value the use of electronic sources differently.

"For research stuff, it is hard to imagine life without the services of Google and all its offshoots"

Learners' use of institutionally provided facilities

> "I think that's very helpful, we get to work through that at our own pace and it's all on the web page at the college. It's good that everything's on there so I can access it from home, I can access it from work, I can access it in here [the college] and [the VLE] tends to be quite well laid out and quite user-friendly."
> Social care day-release student: LEX study [Creanor et al, 2006, p. 16]

Learners value institutionally provided facilities, and particularly value access to course information via Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). However, some students find that VLEs are not complementary to their own experience and high expectations of interactivity, accessibility and fast response times. Students find inconsistency in the use of technology frustrating and an impediment to their study.

Specific findings of the studies are that:

- learners expect the VLE to be used consistently by staff for basic resource sharing
- some learners need training and support in institutionally supported software

- access to VLE, email and other institutional accounts should be through a single password
- personal technologies are poorly supported – e.g. institutional computers often lack USB ports to provide access to memory sticks, and firewalls block instant messaging

Connectivity, communication and social networking

> "So my [group] we always text each other and say oh are you coming in at this time or we'll meet at this time and so it looks on the face of it from the university website that we haven't been communicating all year but we have, it's just outside of that board." Postgraduate law student: LEX study [Creanor et al., 2006, p. 20]

Today's learners are highly connected, frequently using a wide variety of communication tools to support social interaction and social learning. They give this a high level of importance and yet, there is a contradictory finding that academic online communication (often asynchronous discussion boards) is often (not always) problematic. They are far less widely used than other forms of communication, particularly those perceived by learners as under their ownership and control.

Learners value flexible access to their place of learning and to resources while they are off site. Access to tutor-provided lecture notes is highly valued, as is the ability to contact other learners.

A deepening divide

> "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. When I want the internet I have to come here because I don't have a computer, so I'll get one soon and 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." First year marketing student: LEX study [Creanor et al., 2006, p. 17]

There is wide variation in how learners experience technologies: some feel empowered, while others feel inhibited. Cost is an important factor in determining whether and how technology is used, and there is still a need to provide facilities for those who do not have them at home.

"We've been brought up using new technologies, and introducing new ones to our way of work as new technologies appear ..."

Further information

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

References

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