



LEX

The Learner Experience of e-Learning

Guides

Linda Creanor l.creanor@gcal.ac.uk
Kathryn Trinder k.trinder@gcal.ac.uk
Glasgow Caledonian University

Doug Gowan doug.gowan@olp.org.uk
Carol Howells carol.howells@olp.org.uk
The Open Learning Partnership



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LEX guide introduction

The Learner's Experience of E-Learning (LEX) research study was funded under the Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-Learning Development Programme and ran for one year, from May 2005 to June 2006. It formed part of the 'Understanding my Learning' theme which is exploring learner perspectives on e-learning. The aim of the study was to investigate learners' current experiences and expectations of e-learning across the broad range of further, higher, adult, community and work-based learning. We have taken a very broad view of e-learning to encompass a spectrum of technology use from completely online courses, through campus-based courses enhanced by digital resources, to more personalised use of social software and mobile devices.

These guides are intended to be used by all staff on how to get the best out of e-learning and its effectiveness in your organisation. The examples quoted here are from real learners.

Learner Guide

Guide for learners on how to get the best out of a learning environment where technology is used. The examples quoted here are from real learners like you.

Asking for help

Think about how you ask for help - perhaps because you need to be clear about a task or catch up after a gap. Using communications technology can be a big help.

"If you e-mail [the tutor] she'll like get back to you same day but like some of them have been less helpful but ... maybe that's just because some people are more interested in doing it face-to-face and expecting you to come and see them rather than over the... internet but I find sending someone a quick e-mail ... solves a lot of problems and it takes a lot less time."

"Getting together to work on this may be quite difficult and I think we'll have to do all we can to get together ... it'll be beneficial to everyone... using all the resources that are available to us like the e-mail, the Blackboard if we can't meet up... getting the questions answered right there and then."

"The discussion board is for the whole class. We go on and... if somebody's left early and did not get a piece of information they might post... could anybody tell me what happened in the last few hours and just go on and just kind of keep everybody informed."

Getting support

Whom do you go to to get support with using technology for learning? Family and friends may be important as well as your course group. And you may be their source of support.

"I'm probably the person in the family that is relied on ...most to sort out these problems because my mum (is) always coming to me going 'oh I don't know why is the computer doing this and I've to try and sort it out..".

"Somebody would know how to do one thing and someone else would know how to do something else... so you're kind of getting ... different people, yes and you were kind of pulling in ...everybody else's expertise or what little knowledge or more knowledge... they maybe only knew one thing and you knew another and you were able to swap and share."

Taking things step by step

Learning on systems that use unfamiliar technology can seem daunting at first. The best advice is to find people who can support you, and take things one step at a time. You will develop your own ways of doing things and get over the initial anxiety.

"Yeah well basically when I first went on and started to look at it I thought 'oh my god!' 'I don't know whether this is for me?' but then I thought calm down a bit and sit down and go through it step by step".

"I'm beginning to rely less and less on other people showing me what to do, instead of being afraid of technology on the computer, I'm beginning to learn well its not as bad as it seems, take your time, if you make a mistake it doesn't matter just do it again."

Planning your time

Fitting learning into a busy life is a challenge. Intelligent use of learning technology can help you to use your time effectively.

"I can do them anytime, anywhere. At home, at work. When I've got 10 minutes in between meetings, half an hour between other things, it's just you can slot it in any day of the week, you don't have to take a whole chunk out of your day to attend a course."

Working in groups

Experience of working in groups can be a great benefit but here can also be frustrations. You need to work out how to get the best out of your colleagues.

"I enjoy mixtures... of both group work and individual work. Obviously your exams are individual work but this year I'd a mixture of individual... essays and reports and group work so I can see the advantages of both."

"I've had a bit more experience of people free riding last year which obviously is a bit annoying because you end up doing more work and you feel like you shouldn't have to. But apart from that I think it's good because it improves your team work, oral communications, whereas if you're doing work on your own it's just yourself and your own opinions. "

"I feel that group work is somewhat frustrating..... I just find it a bit tedious and pointless and... at the moment there's one member who doesn't do any work and there's really nothing you can do about that ."

Access to computers

Having materials and coursework online is great for access - but you will need to make sure you can get on to the computer.

"The only bad thing I've got is if I'm sitting on the computer guaranteed the kids want on it and then they're like oh can I get on, can I get on so in the end I just get up and leave it and let them go on it."

Author and designer guide

Have you provided a starter guide to use of and navigation around your learning materials?

For new learners, the design of your learning environment can be a shock. To others it may seem quaint and old-fashioned. You might tackle both problems by improving guidance on your system, or perhaps by running starter or induction sessions.

"The first time you kind of hit a brick wall... you go 'aargh'. But when you do it the first time you think 'I (did) that' and then move on to the next thing."

"Like thinking I was quite confident in IT... and it'll only take me half an hour.... It was something you were spending at least an hour on just trying to learn the IT part of it before you could put your input into the course."

Is all course material available online or only some?

Learners value having one place to find course resources and feedback. They see the internet as a complete information resource and expect courses to be the same.

"So that's really good just to log on from home and you can see what's going on straight away, you know, like what's happening. You just feel like kind of connected like it sort of keeps you up-to-date."

"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...."

Are materials available offline as well as online?

Many learners also welcome the opportunity to have materials available in print as well as online - and this can be an important time saver.

"But sometimes... I have to print things out because I find it hard to kind of follow what's happening..."

[about video lectures] "Well to be honest I haven't really been watching them [laughs] because you can get transcripts of them and I would rather just read the transcripts, it takes a lot less time to read over five pages than it does to listen to somebody speak basically for half an hour."

Can the learning materials be used or accessed on a variety of devices that learners use - for example phones, PDAs and iPods as well as PCs and laptops.

Learners have strong views about the devices they prefer to use and want flexible access. Testing out learning materials on mobile devices can help make them more flexible.

"I send things from my laptop to me, to my phone, ring tones and pictures and just anything. I use it for internet if I need, like if I want to know football scores or anything I just I can easily just go on internet and find out all the information you need.... "

"You have your own set up at home, one of my friends has thalidomide but she can sit and type for hours because she's got it set up so that it's all here for her. so it's nice if you can do it in your environment that's set up for you and that you're comfortable in...."

"Using...computers for your assignments and even mobile phones if you're... getting with your friends or even tutors. Mobile phones have started coming in a lot....Just by using text messages maybe and saying 'do you know how to do this bit."

Do the materials cope with differences between learners?

It is common to find a wide range of learner attitudes towards their own IT abilities. Learners themselves are often aware of these differences. Think about how this affects the way courses are designed.

"I feel fine with it now because I've grown up with it, and I learnt to type and things, so its easy, it seems as natural to me as writing now, its got to the stage and I kind of know how to fix them when broken."

{About computers} "I just feel that they don't co-operate with me... I find sometimes... things will just crop up that I've no idea what to do with them... and I just can't really be bothered to deal with it. It's just a... hassle sometimes...."

"There were 37 of us on this course and you range from totally beginner, like myself, to really like IT specialist, so they had absolutely no problem and had a lot of confidence in talking to each other on discussion boards because they'd obviously done it before...."

Can your learning materials be accessed in small blocks?

Many learners are faced with competing pressures on their time from work and family as well as study commitments. They value the opportunity to snatch opportunities to fit learning into a busy day.

"I can do them anytime, anywhere. At home, at work. When I've got 10 minutes in between meetings, half an hour between other things, its just you can slot it in any day of the week, you don't have to take a whole chunk out of your day to attend a course."

"It just depends on how the course provider lays out the course and how they allow you to access the course. Because of course they still control how you learn and at what pace you learn, even though access tends to be controlled by me... They don't dictate you must be there every Tuesday between 9 and 11 ... that's the part that you can control. The rest of it is up to the course provider."

Is it clear what happens when learners submit their work?

Learners may get the impression that their work is disappearing into a black hole if they don't get rapid feedback or guidance on when to get it.

"I haven't found this a positive experience ...I didn't feel that posting things on discussion boards that we got the feedback, people weren't feeding back like they do in a classroom. If I had to do an online English course then I'd find that a positive experience because you're just getting feedback off your tutor, but I felt that when you're going onto an online discussion board the level of IT that is required at times has put some people off and you're not getting the positive results."

"You can also if you want, have a discussion... over [the VLE] but I tend not to use it because well the teachers take a while to get back and it's not very personal.... "

Are you aware of the communications channels learners are using?

There may be many informal as well as formal or VLE based communication channels. And face to face meetings have a place.

"I'd use [MSN] with my friends as well... I started using it when I went to Canada for... six months and it was useful for speaking to my friends from home... my mum would manage to get herself logged on... "

"I would prefer actually meeting (with them) because I find it's easier to discuss these things face-to-face so I would rather we were all sitting in the same room talking about it.... but quick questions... that you just think of and you'll maybe not see any of them for a couple of days, it would be the Blackboard or the e-mail that I would go with..."

Does your learning design encourage peer support and recognise that it may take place in different ways?

Group working may be built formally into your course design – and may be accompanied by a wide variety of different types of peer support.

"I had to leave early last week because my child minder was off and I had to pick up my son from the nursery so I missed the afternoon lecture... I went onto the message board and asked for information about what I'd missed. People were kind enough to log on ... and they let me know what groups I was in and what the presentation was about and things like that so it was good for catching up in that respect if you miss anything people will be able to fill you in."

Support staff guide

If the learning environment is online is it available 24/7?

Learners often lead pressurised lives and need to be able to use the systems when it suits them.

"Based on this learning centre I would actually like to take my exams or test at the same time I do my lessons so probably like six in the evening, six thirty but they don't... you've got to take that day off... and that costs me a day's wages."

Is support available when learners need it?

Learners can feel adrift if there is no one to turn to for guidance and discussion boards are not an adequate replacement.

"It would be nice if they could give you some guidance and say 'this is what you're meant to be doing at this time' because sometimes it is a bit up in the air... There's so much to do and that doesn't coincide with any class so there's nobody you can go to and say 'well, where am I supposed to be now' ... unless you went onto the online discussion forum again but that's not face-to-face and it's not helpful."

Can learners use their own kit?

Being able to use their own preferred hardware and software can make an important difference to learners and may be key to accessibility.

"You have your own set up at home, one of my friends has thalidomide but she can sit and type for hours because she's got it set up so that it's all here for her. so it's nice if you can do it in your environment that's set up for you and that you're comfortable in...."

Do teaching staff get support for developments - for example, a new or upgraded VLE?

Learners are quick to spot differences between tutor usage of VLEs and may find this frustrating.

"If you e-mail [tutor] she'll like get back to you same day... But some of them have been... less helpful but... maybe that's just because some people are more interested in doing it face-to-face and expecting you to come and see them rather than over the internet.. I find sending someone a quick e-mail it solves a lot of problems and it takes a lot less time."

Are there formal induction arrangements for learners to the VLE?

First impressions of a VLE can be daunting. Some problems could be avoided through better VLE induction arrangements.

"Oh it was awful the first day because my friend was getting really stressed because we had been told to look something up... I think it was for the course work for a seminar and when you can't get it you know full well that you're going to go in and be like 'my computer doesn't work' ..."

"So no one really taught us how to use it (VLE)... We sort of got thrown in the deep end, so a lot of people on my course are still finding that they can't get into their web mail or they can't get into [the VLE]... we knew our password after a week in the library, so we we're standing there fuming... no one seems to tell us...."

Manager guide

Is your network security too restrictive?

"It's one of your main sources that come up in college so if you can't find the stuff on it that you want and you can't get on and do anything that you need and there's quite a lot of things like in our building there's quite a lot of the sites that are now blocked and they say like blocked for an inappropriate content and there's nothing the matter with them and you know there's not but it's maybe just there's one specific word in it somewhere that they have on a filter list that means you can't access anything on that page and it says, you know, like your, your attempt to access this site has been recorded so you have to go somewhere else and get information that might not even be as relevant as what you need."

Not all learners have computers at home- do you provide enough access at your organisation? And are facilities which have access to technology efficiently managed and utilised?

"Because like the (ICT) labs are always busy. It's like a very all go system so usually I feel like obliged to get off the computer when I see people coming in, even if I've just got on it."

"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."

Have you kept a blend of books and online resources-that is, choice for all learners?

"With the generation nowadays there's more tendency to rely on the computer, whereas with me I will use a computer, but realise it's a tool, not the be all and end all and also go and get books - and I think that's where the big difference lies with my reports, there's been an equal, you know, stuff to do with books and online, rather than just all online and I think that makes a big difference because I do read a lot and I think that helps a lot."

"When doing research it's torture if it's a bad website and sometimes I'm finding on essays and things you've got to add lots of references and things and they're saying use books, but books cost money so the internet is the main thing that we end up using and just trawling through all these websites, you never know if the knowledge is actually good or not, so I'm always worried that I'm handing something in which is completely just one guys opinion, but it looks really professional, but maybe he's a complete liar but he's made a really pretty web page."

"I find it a bit difficult using the internet all the time because I find that you get waylaid and other things pop up and you find yourself, and I find I'm distracted, very distracted, you know, that I find that you just can't access the exact thing you're looking for and I spend so much time trawling, surfing the net looking for the information that I'm looking for, you know, the specific stuff that I need."

Tutor guide

Are you aware of the range of ICT skills and preferences among learners?

Many learner groups will contain people of widely differing abilities.

"Well we just take it on as our disadvantage that we're not up to speed with the sort of the typing skills but it is to a certain extent unfair because it means it adds another three, four hours...."

"I feel fine with it now because I've grown up with it, and I learnt to type and things, so its easy, it seems as natural to me as writing now, its got to the stage and I kind of know how to fix them when broken."

"What I learnt was that there were 37 of us on this course and you range from totally beginner, like myself, to really like IT specialist, so they had absolutely no problem and had a lot of confidence in talking to each other on discussion boards because they'd obviously done it before, so they had more of a rapport."

What expectations do learners have about support from you?

Learners will be clear about what they expect from you and how you respond to them online.

“For that course (the tutor) was doing he was watching the forums and watching what was being asked because every so often he would pop in with an answer or people would post something to him directly and the answer would come back really quickly... and when I hadn't logged on, I'd forgotten to say I was going away and I hadn't logged in for just over a week and when I came home I had an email from him that was like 'Hi, you ok? Have you got problems accessing?' So that kind of thing was really important.... ”

“If you e-mail [the tutor] she'll like get back to you same day... But some of them have been... less helpful but... maybe that's just because some people are more interested in doing it face-to-face and expecting you to come and see them rather than over the internet.. I find sending someone a quick e-mail it solves a lot of problems and it takes a lot less time.”

What staff development is available for tutors at your organisation in terms of ICT and e-learning skills? Are your ICT and e-learning skills up to date?

Learners are aware of differences in IT skills between tutors. Some of them are aware that they are more skilled than their tutor.

"The tutor was like 'I've never seen this before (an online resource)... I don't even know what it is and I hope I don't have to get involved in it.."

"They still feel like they're completely divorced from each other (online and f2f work) because often the tutors don't know anything about the online projects... so you can't really discuss them and they're really different issues that come up."

"Not all, not all the tutors support Blackboard as well as each other, some of them are much better at it than others and when you become maybe comfortable with one tutor and he's extremely helpful on it, you sort of expect that from maybe some of the others but there's probably a couple who don't use it much at all..."

Do you provide support for learners when they are first introduced to the learning environment?

Learners may be familiar with everyday applications like email, but a VLE can seem strange or intimidating.

"Slightly intimidated [by VLE] but not too bad because I had been very used to using e-mail and I had erm, lectures by way of [web] casts on undergraduate so I'd already been used to kind of clicking into sort of individual areas, you know, and kind of following that and but I actually I mean once you've done it once I mean I really find it very simple to use."

"...so no one really taught us how to use it (VLE)... We sort of got thrown in the deep end, so a lot of people on my course are still finding that they can't get into their web mail or they can't get into [the VLE]... we knew our password after a week in the library, so we we're standing there fuming... no one seems to tell us..."

Do you provide support to learners in how to search effectively on the web?

Web searching is a favourite pastime and information literacy is an essential skill - but support is needed in an academic environment.

"You're just left to search for stuff on your own. But they're trying to make us more independent so it means if you're searching for stuff it's up to you to search for it and make sure that what you're searching for is the right thing and if you don't know what you're searching for you end up having to ask each other and if one doesn't know and the other one doesn't know then you're all kind of stuck."

How do learners check their understanding of what is required by learning tasks and assignments?

Messaging and online discussions are a valuable way for learners to check their understanding of what is required by course tasks.

"You can use it to like leave notes for people and say, you know, I've done this, can you do that or I don't know what to do for this like can you help me and things like that. So it's used more like in that way just between like different smaller group."

"I mean people would post things and they would ask a question and there was myself, there were other people who had the experience in IT.... and there is a few of us that have a knowledge of IT and we were able to go back and say 'well ok it's presented like this in the course, but you could also maybe use it like this or like this' I think that worked quite well, the forums, the café and that kind of thing were quite useful because those who found it more 'oh what would you use it for?' were able to come and ask and others were able to go and say 'well you could use it like this.'"

"They were really useful and they were good not only for looking back over the topics because you'd have one at the end of each exercise, not only at looking back at what other people had done and what they'd found, but it was also good if you got into one and you were thinking 'well I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to be doing.'"

What communications networks are learners using - other than the formal environment?

Your VLE discussion board may be quiet - but this may disguise an underworld of messaging between learners.

"I use it [discussion board] like once or twice a week but I think because we see each other a lot and we use, like we contact each other in the evenings like over MSN Messenger if we're doing work quite a lot or just do text and then that way I think when you don't use it [discussion board] as much as other people who would not like text their mates or speak to them on the internet."

"I tend to be a bit of a net-worker in general so I would go and ask people for help like I've got a lot of friends who would be doing computer science degrees, things like that, they would help me out or looking up things like, I guess you can use the internet to self-teach, you can get...tutorials and things."

"I'm addicted, it's the first thing I turn on in the morning before I even wake up and it actually it's very, very bad. I think in the future people can't cope without their laptops. My main use of it is I guess social networking. It would be My Space and Messenger and e-mail things like that and then secondary would be information gathering in terms of like I said, my home page is the technology website and current affairs, news. I have alerts coming into me so I get information and then I use search engines for academic purposes, erm mostly My Space and Messenger, it's terrible [laughs]."

Do your learners draw a distinction between assessed and non-assessed communications and postings?

Having postings form part of assessed work will affect how learners see them.

"It's very formal and everything anybody's posted has been as part of an activity, even, there's one activity where we've to post in the internet café or something and post some discussion topics are very formal."

How do learners feel about group work?

Group work can be stimulating - and also very frustrating.

"I feel that group work is somewhat frustrating..... I just find it a bit tedious and pointless and... at the moment there's one member who doesn't do any work and there's really nothing you can do about that..."

"Somebody would know how to do one thing and someone else would know how to do something else... so you're kind of getting ... different people, yes and you were kind of pulling in ...everybody else's expertise or what little knowledge or more knowledge... they maybe only knew one thing and you knew another and you were able to swap and share."

"For instance if you can't go any further until you're waiting on somebody to post a reply to something or put up information on something that you're activity is dependant on then you just have to wait. That's when I might consider doing the activities out of order."