What is a VLE and why use it?: group activity

Collection: Online teaching

Resource: What are VLE's good for?

Approximate duration

20 - 30 minutes or 1-2 hours depending on the type of activity chosen.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this classroom discussion activity participants will have been introduced to some of the key concepts and definitions underlying e-learning. Further, they will have had a chance to discuss how different e-learning tools could be used with students and the potential successes and pitfalls they may encounter when using them.

Introduction

This activity works best with groups of more than 4 students. Larger groups (say 10 or more students) could very easily be divided into pairs or small groups of 3 or 4. It would be ideal if a spokesperson were appointed for each group and notes captured either onto flipchart paper or directly into a shareable online document (e.g. a Google Doc - http://docs.google.com or a free Wiki like PBworks - http://www.pbworks.com). The advantage of capturing into a live document is that you don't need to transcribe later and the link to the document can be shared with all the participants.

This exercise could be useful in establishing gaps in understanding within the group which could potentially assist in the planning of further training and development.

The activity

1. As a warm-up or icebreaker to get the group thinking about what place technology plays in relation to learning, how it has or hasn't changed over time, how it impacts on our work and our students' work, how many potential barriers there are to overcome, how it is supported etc.. it may be useful to show a videoclip. Two that might work well are:

   o A humorous short clip: The 'Medieval Help Desk' accessible on YouTube.

   Medieval helpdesk
   (http://youtu.be/pQHX-SjgQvQ)

   o or...A longer plenary address from a recent e-learning conference in the United Kingdom , Martin Bean, Vice Chancellor of the Open University talks about a Journey through Innovation and in it he presents a vision of the potential of technology in education both now and in the future.(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJSRkhx4T3k)

   " A journey in innnovation" - Martin Bean at ALT-C 2009
   (http://youtu.be/HJSRkhx4T3k)

You might like to use this clip as a springboard for a class discussion about technology over the centuries...Feather quills, the printing press, the overhead projector have all been new technologies in their day. Some questions might include:

- How does the ever quickening pace of technological change affect us as educators.
- How about support?
- How do we overcome fears about technology?
- How does it impact on our work?
- What kind of barriers are there to overcome?

2. When you feel it most appropriate you may also want to ask the group for some definitions and/or explanations of:
   o What we mean when we say 'e-learning' or 'blended learning' are they the same? How do they differ from 'distance' learning?
   o What is a Virtual Learning Environment?
   o Find out what kind of VLE is available for staff at your institution to use and what tools/functionality it has?
     - What additional software or hardware is available to academic staff to augment the VLE on your campus? Examples might include:
       1. Additional software for creating formative and summative quizzes
       2. Podcasting equipment and software
       3. Desktop screen capture software (for recording what you do on screen..useful for feedback)
       4. Plagiarism detection software/systems
       5. Lecture capture software
       6. Handheld voting systems
       7. Synchronous conferencing /videoconferencing systems
       8. Blogs and or wikis

If you are teaching in a PC lab or there are enough laptops in the group for pairs to use, then as an alternative you could ask the group to research these questions themselves.

Once you feel that everyone has an understanding of the definitions and terms being used then....

3. Ask the students to form pairs or small groups and discuss the following questions for about 15 minutes.

Provide a pre-amble along the lines of "I'd like to get a feel for how you are using e-learning, what exactly you think it is...does it work etc...To get you started I have a small discussion task and a series of prompts.

Here are some discussion prompts you could put on a PowerPoint slide or a handout....

- o What are VLEs good for?
- o How are you using your VLE now?
- o How would you like to be using it?
- o What don't you like about your VLE?
- o What sort of things are you doing with your student?
- o What would you like to be doing?
- o What do your students think of it?
- o What modes of assessment are most commonly used?
- o Are you supported in your online efforts? / Where do you get support from?

4. Finally bring the group back together and ask a selection of the questions to the whole class and allow each group to give a response. You could use this opportunity to highlight good ideas you've heard as you circulate around the groups or focus on ideas that introduce a subject/topic you want to discuss in more detail later.

Examples

In 2005 The English Subject Centre surveyed the community to find out attitudes and uses of online learning. This document contains some examples of what your colleagues thought were the benefits of using a Virtual Learning Environment.

Links & References

- [Wikipedia](#) has a comprehensive history of the Virtual Learning Environment dating back to 1728.
- [The English Subject Centre's e-learning projects](#) - There are a lot of project reports on the Subject Centre website that mention the benefits of VLEs
- [The English Subject Centre's e-learning case studies](#) - The E-learning Case studies on the Subject Centre website provide a window into innovative teaching practice in English departments across the UK
- [The Duologue project website](#) - A website that explores how BlackBoard was rolled out in the English Department at Durham University
- [Effective Use of Virtual Learning Environments](#) This very useful infokit from the JISC provides a great deal of information about getting started with VLE's

Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework (PSF)

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Core Knowledge 4:** The use of appropriate learning technologies

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.

http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/

Resources in the Online teaching Collection

- Online teaching: introduction to the collection
- What are VLE's good for?: resource overview
    - **What is a VLE and why use it?: group activity (*you are here)**
    - What is a VLE and why use it?: individual activity
- The design of online activities in English Studies: resource overview

- o Evaluating online activities in English Studies: group activity

- o Evaluating online activities in English Studies: individual activity

- Designing learning with new media: resource overview

  - o Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: group activity

  - o Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: individual activity

  - o Designing an online activity in English Studies: group activity

  - o Designing an online activity in English Studies: individual activity

- Teaching with digital archives: resource overview

  - o Teaching with digital archives: group activity

  - o Teaching with digital archives: individual activity

- Online discussion in English Studies: resource overview

  - o Should online discussion be assessed?: group activity

  - o Should online discussion be assessed?: individual activity

- Workshopping online: resource overview

  - o Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: group activity

  - o Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: individual activity