Submission to Networked Learning 2002

THEME:	e-learning, e-tutoring, e-university
SUB-THEME:	Student and tutor experiences of networked learning
TITLE:	How was it for you? Student and staff experiences of e-learning
AUTHORS:	Liz McDowell & Pat Gannon-Leary
INSTITUTION:	University of Northumbria
SESSION TYPE:	Poster
CONTACT NAME AND ADDRESS:	Liz McDowell e-Learning Project Manager Ellison Building University of Northumbria Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST
TELEPHONE:	0191-227-4483
EMAIL:	Liz.mcdowell@unn.ac.uk
NUMBER OF WORDS	568
FIVE KEYWORDS	Student experience Staff experience Virtual learning environment Case studies Return on investment

How was it for you? Student and staff experiences of e-learning

The poster will illustrate work in progress on a set of case studies designed to illuminate staff and student experiences of learning, teaching and assessment using a virtual learning environment (VLE). The University of Northumbria began to implement the Blackboard VLE (http://www.blackboard.com) during the 2000/2001 academic year. Blackboard is now being used across a range of courses in all Faculties. The type of use varies, including the provision of electronic access to learning resources to assist on campus learners; the use of communication facilities to enhance flexible learning; and the use of a wide range of VLE facilities for distance learning courses.   Use and impacts are being monitored and evaluated in a range of ways but here we report on a qualitative element of the evaluation.

We are studying a number of instances of the use of Blackboard as case studies. The aim is to illuminate the perspectives of those directly involved. The main focus is on students and academic staff but the perspectives of administrators, other support staff and managers are also included. Each case study draws on a range of data including: interviews with students and staff; documentary sources such as course handbooks and the course Blackboard site; and, where applicable, observational data, including 'electronic observation' of activity online. Case studies are initially agreed with the Course Leader and an agreement is drawn up which addresses issue of confidentiality and means of gaining consent from staff and students for observational work. Participation in interviews is voluntary for all those concerned.

The conceptual model for the study draws on the intuitive Return on Investment (ROI) framework proposed by Collis and Moonen (2001). This framework addresses the concerns of many of the stakeholders involved in the University's e-learning developments. Typical questions, asked by students, lecturers, managers and others about the use of Blackboard are: – Is it working? Is it an improvement? Is it worth it? These are not simply resource-driven questions about 'the bottom line' or evidence of resistance to change. For example, when lecturers ask these questions it is often part of an attempt to resolve dilemmas of professional practice in a new context. The intuitive ROI model suggests that we should try to answer such questions by concentrating on changes occurring through the use of Blackboard which are important and meaningful to those concerned. The issues on which we are choosing to focus are the inter-linked aspects of efficiency and effectiveness. In relation to efficiency we consider the time, effort and resources demanded of those teaching and learning in this new context. We look critically at claims for 'ease of access' (to electronic materials or communication) and the anticipated benefits of 'flexibility' (of time, place and pace). In considering effectiveness, our main focus is on quality of learning and in this we draw on the perspectives of relational students learning research (e.g. Prossser & Trigwell, 1999).

Within this framework we believe that we can obtain insights into significant issues but also remain open to the views of staff and students which may not fit with our expectations. For example, we have discovered from our initial case study that we may have unthinkingly assumed that staff and students would be operating with some fluency in the electronic learning environment whereas their experiences have shown us that we may need to give much more weight to the frustrations and distress which they see as caused by 'the technology'.

References
Collis, B. & Moonen, J. (2001) *Flexible learning in a digital world: experiences and expectations.* London: Kogan Page
Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding learning and teaching: the experience in Higher Education,* Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press,