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Influences on WebCT usage: a study of attitudes and practices in the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Events

Stuart Moss

Higher education is changing, a greater number of courses are now being delivered online or partially supported online with the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as WebCT, which are 'a set of teaching and learning tools designed to enhance a student's learning experience by including computers and the Internet in the learning process' (Whatis.com, 2004). ICT is helping to deconstruct the physical location of universities, indeed Bridges (2000) noted that the adoption of ICT by universities 'has rendered the face-to-face contact between student and supervisor in the university and even visits to the library a rare rather than routine part of the experience' (p.39).

WebCT brings many advantages to HE institutions including automated testing, storage, communicative mediums and the potential for collaboration not only between staff and students within their own institution, but potentially worldwide between institutions (WebCT Inc., 2002). WebCT was introduced to Leeds Met in 2002 and since then all accredited modules taught at Leeds Met have had a basic WebCT presence.

With any form of ICT in the work place, such as VLEs, effective change management is vital to their successful introduction (Aschmann and Julian, 2004). Resistance to change occurs for a number of reasons, for instance when familiarisation of new working practices require a personal investment of time (Hind and Moss, 2005); and in an ICT context the extra burden upon time often amounts to training. When implementing new ICT systems 'people's resistance to change will be one of the biggest obstacles to success' (Pratt, 2005, p.36). People resist change when they do not see that is applicable to their own situation or the relevance of the change (Lieb, 1991); hence expecting academics to learn how to use a new ICT system without a sufficient rationale for its use or support for its maintenance, consigns the system to higher likelihood of failure, than it would have with their wholehearted support.

Whilst Leeds Met has made a corporate commitment to using WebCT, there is no onus on any member of staff to actually develop or use WebCT, however staff in each faculty and school are encouraged from management level downwards to embrace and utilise WebCT. Tourism, Hospitality and Events (THE) is one such school where WebCT usage is encouraged. A study was undertaken in THE to ascertain whether or not there is a relationship between knowledge of academics' ICT capabilities and attitudes towards WebCT usage.

The research utilised a questionnaire divided into three sections. The first contained twenty questions on a Likert scale designed to assess academics' attitudes towards and usage of ICT in education, as well as knowledge of WebCT specifically. The second section contained twenty questions again on a Likert scale designed to assess *actual* WebCT usage amongst academics. The final

section was qualitative, and allowed respondents opportunities to provide 'additional information'.

Analysis of sections 1 and 2 revealed the following:

- Generally, respondents have a 'moderate' amount of experience of using ICT in education.
- There are varying attitudes towards ICT in education, though generally respondents expressed a positive attitude towards using ICT in education.
- There is a great deal of variance with regards to respondents' knowledge of WebCT. Some know it very well, whilst others have little knowledge of it.
- There is a blend of both positive and negative attitudes towards WebCT.
- There is a very high degree of difference with regards to the *use* of WebCT. The very regular users of most WebCT features are in a minority; whereas the vast majority of respondents, whilst regular WebCT users, are very limited in their use of WebCT's features. In their case, predominantly WebCT was used in the main for only for adding lecture slides and other support materials.

To analyse responses on the Likert scale, each possible response was given a score ranging from -2 to 2. By correlating section 1 and section 2 responses it was established that a correlation of 0.8 exists. This is a very strong positive correlation and indicates that respondents with more experience, knowledge and a positive attitude towards ICT in education and WebCT are more likely to use it than those with less experience, knowledge and a negative attitude towards ICT in education and WebCT.

Analysis of section 3 suggested the following about WebCT usage.

Positives:

- Staff really want to learn how to use WebCT.
- There is recognition by some staff that they are only using part of WebCT, with a desire to learn more.
- Many staff are happy with how WebCT works, and with their own usage of it.
- WebCT is seen as good by staff for reducing the amount of printing and photocopying.
- Staff within THE are overall aware of who their WebCT champions are and are asking them for advice.
- WebCT is used for more than basic module support, it is also being used in a distance taught module.

Negatives:

- Staff believe that they are not being supported adequately in how to use WebCT with the current training being offered not tailored enough for their needs.
- WebCT's interface has changed with updating, which has dissuaded members of staff from using it.
- Staff are expressing that they do not have the time to learn how to use WebCT.
- WebCT will remain unused by those academics who consider it to be a lesser priority than their other commitments.
- Certain management figures are perceived as not being WebCT users by their teams.
- Some members of staff do not wish to share their resources with others.

- WebCT is seen as a tool that raises student dissatisfaction levels, when certain staff choose not to use it.

This study suggests that there is a strong positive correlation exists between THE academics' experience of ICT in education and their knowledge of and attitudes towards WebCT and WebCT usage. Any strategy to increase WebCT usage amongst ICT resistant staff and others should considered this. The evidence shows that WebCT and its complexities are simply too off-putting for many staff to use it. However, until timely, tailored and targeted training can be organised, usage of WebCT and its range of facilities is likely to remain low. More effort from senior management needs to be put into staff development in order to improve their skill sets to develop competence.

One alternative would be the introduction of a less complex VLE system and another might be to aim at the root of the problem by establishing programmes for the enhancement of basic ICT skills, including rationales about *why* e-Learning and the use of VLEs can be beneficial not only to the students, but to staff and institution.

To this effect progress the following recommendations are made:

- THE school management and senior figures from within each Centre should themselves be fully trained in WebCT in order to lead others. This will send out the 'right signals' to other members of staff who may feel that there is a 'do as I say, not as I do' attitude.
- A skills audit of both ICT and WebCT skills should be carried out on all THE academics; from this, individual development programmes could be created.
- A weekly THE/possibly Faculty staff development slot could be held within the library during non-teaching time. This need not be facilitated by one person, indeed as skills are gained throughout the school, a rolling programme of various ICT and WebCT based training sessions could be developed.
- Staff should be allocated time within their profiled hours to develop their skills within Leeds Met by attending appropriate staff development sessions from within 'What Follows'. ECDL certification is one such class that would be enormously beneficial to many.
- In order to relieve some of the pressures faced by existing WebCT champions, 'WebCT mentors' be trained to guide colleagues through the very basics of WebCT, such as using file manager and adding content.
- Changes and proposed changes could be better communicated. In the absence of the Leeds Met-wide e-learning newsletter, an internal THE letter could be developed to keep all staff informed about what is happening (including university-wide WebCT changes and upgrades and how this may affect them).
- Finally as an 'extra', at critical times of year such as module start times, focused, intensive refresher sessions could be held as a reminder about how to add content and make basic changes to WebCT modules.

There is little doubt that the investment in the ICT and WebCT development of members of the THE academic team can be of significant long-term benefit. The advantages offered by supported e-learning as part of a blended delivery model to students make overcoming 'barriers' that hinder WebCT usage a worthwhile exercise. Increased WebCT usage will ultimately make courses more accessible, not only to those who have commitments such as families and jobs, but also to

those who study part-time or may be geographically dispersed and distant from the University campuses. As such, Increased WebCT usage could only be of benefit to the School and institution as a whole.

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