
My VLE at Maynooth: e-learning and the library

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries have been involved with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) for some time. As a result it is not surprising that the library at the National University of Ireland Maynooth welcomed the opportunity to become involved in a three year campus wide pilot project to evaluate e-learning and Virtual Learning Environments from 2002-2005. This opportunity expanded further when the library became the main source of training for teaching staff on managing their VLE content in year three of the project. This development strengthened the library's contribution to not only the e-learning pilot project but also allowed the library to become involved at a strategic level in negotiating the future of e-learning on campus.

PILOT PROJECT EXPLAINED

Years 1 and 2

The first two years of the pilot project focused on Blackboard, a well-established VLE. A core group of departments expressed an interest in e-learning and were invited to take part in the pilot project. They made their material available to their students via this platform. The Quality Promotion Office, who co-ordinate many teaching and learning initiatives on campus, administered the VLE, including the issuing of usernames and passwords, over a two year period. It was used mainly to supplement existing teaching practices. Students now had an additional place to source lecture notes and interact with one another via discussion forums.

Year 3

For the third year of the pilot project the university used an in-house system. The

Department of Electronic Engineering has a VLE in place to support their distance education students. The Degree Extension for Technicians (DEFT) programme provides an opportunity for electronics technicians already working in industry to study off-site by allowing them remote internet access to course modules. These students only attend campus for laboratories and examinations. For the pilot project it was decided to expand the DEFT VLE model for more general use. The Department of Electronic Engineering heroically took on the challenge of developing a sophisticated, yet simple-to-use, system that could offer similar services available from larger commercial systems to our student body. The result was MyVLE. An evaluation of the two systems at the end of the project would inform the university how to proceed down the electronic highway.

Registered users – Figure 1

	Blackboard	MyVLE
Staff	50	78
Students	720	2636

LIBRARY INVOLVEMENT

Due to the changing interfaces at the start of year three, further training was needed for those involved in the pilot and this opened up an opportunity for the library. All those who registered an interest in e-learning on campus were invited to attend training sessions given by the Library. While in principle many features are similar to Blackboard there are some key differences between the two systems that needed explanation:

- MyVLE integrates with existing systems - students and staff no longer need a separate username and password but can log on using their university identification;
- the preferred e-mail for correspondence was university e-mail accounts with occasional exceptions being made for certain part-time and off-campus users;
- all queries are sent to a local support e-mail address and answered by a technician in Electronic Engineering with a remarkably high turnaround time in response to queries;
- the library provides guides to support both staff and students and supplementary support material was designed to meet needs as they arose;

- an in-house system provides a unique opportunity for teaching and learning staff, the library, the Department of Electronic Engineering and the Computer Centre to work together on the operations of this project;
- existing staff in the university now have to provide all the support for the system and this at times can be a huge draw on time and resources.

Figure 2 – MyVLE logon screen



FEEDBACK FROM USERS

From early on the interest in MyVLE was phenomenal. The Library provided 13 optional training sessions from August to December to 56 teaching staff demonstrating how to upload and manage material in MyVLE. Other staff registered with MyVLE and uploaded material successfully without attending any training session. Mandatory attendance at this initial training and also at some e-learning pedagogy training is a recommendation from the pilot project to ensure that maximum benefit is gained. Simply making “paper” lecture notes available in electronic format is under utilizing this powerful resource.

From August to December 2,636 students were registered on the system and this soared exceedingly beyond expectations. The pilot project certainly had no shortage of participants! Student queries on printing, saving and downloading material turned up everywhere on campus as they began using this resource. The volume of queries at times was staggering but showed clearly that this was a highly used resource. Expectation rose among students that all their course lecture notes would be available for downloading. Despite the high usage and the ensuing demands the system worked well. Once staff and students became accustomed to managing or sourcing information the queries lessened.

INITIAL EVALUATIONS

Initial evaluations indicate that essentially both Blackboard and MyVLE were used to support existing teaching. Lecture notes were made available for students to download and some links to library resources were put in place. The literature on ensuring library links are used in VLEs is widespread and references at the end of this article go into this discussion in more detail.

The more advanced features -such as online quizzes and assessments- were used rarely, as were the discussion forums. However, those departments who used these resources found them very useful, indicating that low usage does not make these features invaluable. The pilot project raised awareness among the university community of e-learning and e-learning tools, and this is now a

strong foundation to build on. The pilot project included academic departments from across the campus including Science, Social Science and the Arts. Student and staff evaluation in the form of questionnaires and focus groups are now taking place and this will determine how useful each subject or faculty sees these e-learning tools.

LIBRARY CONTRIBUTION

Being involved at this early stage has been particularly useful for the library. By not being involved the library would have missed out on the provision of a service now being used by almost half the student population. The queries alone that this generated in the library would have been very frustrating for desk staff and subject librarians to handle had we not known of this initiative. Rieger reports that “academic librarians may be losing new opportunities to contribute to improving student learning and faculty research on campus”¹ by not being involved in e-learning projects and certainly this could have been the case at NUI Maynooth. The Department of Electronic Engineering were very open to hearing the opinion of the Library as they developed the product before it was launched and also to hearing feedback from users once it was in operation. This willingness to consider such opinions certainly contributed to the creation of a highly successful service. Academic librarians should be confident that their years of evaluating

electronic resources and teaching users how to use these resources will give them skills that can extend beyond the library as the use of technology continues to increase in teaching. If librarians are not involved not only will their skills be under utilised but also there is every chance their libraries will also.

CONCLUSION

As we are reaching the end of the three-year pilot project the next step is to evaluate what the three years has taught us about e-learning. One clear lesson already visible is that libraries and e-learning can have a symbiotic relationship. Serious decisions regarding e-learning must be made here at NUI Maynooth. The library values our involvement at both the pilot project stage and beyond.

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NOTES

- 1 Oya Rieger, 'Linking course websites to library collections and services', *Journal of academic librarianship*, 30 (3), 2005, p205