

The Evolution of Technical Support for Blended Distance Learners

Talking About... Learning and Teaching: Technology for Instruction Case Study 006

University of Birmingham

Programme of Study:
Various MA

Module: All

Discipline: Education

Start Date: January 2002

Students: Mature

Cohort Size: Between 20
and 300

Type: Distance

Technology: Discussion
boards on WebCT

Approach: eLearning
administration

Learning Hours: n/a

Duration of Activity: n/a

Indicative Moderation /
Facilitation Hours: admin
staff check for queries on
an agreed schedule

Assessment Link: n/a

Rationale

Many Postgraduate and Professional Development Programmes (PPD) within the School of Education are offered at a distance with students mainly UK and EU based. These programmes are delivered in a blended manner with students often receiving paper-based materials with an online repository through to online content and activities with some paper and face-to-face elements. Timely technical support is a key factor for ensuring that students can access their learning materials, activities and related resources.

Practice

As accessing the online environment was key to many of the learning designs, dedicated Technical Support bulletin boards initially became an established feature of all WebCT programme and module elements. E-learning and/or administrative staff in line with a service level agreement (daily, every two days) monitored each Technical Issues support area.

The screenshot shows a WebCT interface for a discussion board. At the top, there is a 'Create Message' button. Below it are 'Expand All' and 'Collapse All' buttons, and a 'Display:' label. The main content is a table with columns for 'Subject', 'Messages', and 'Author'. The table lists three messages:

Subject	Messages	Author
Technical Issues	3	Rolf Schwarz
Re:Technical Issues		Frances Tomlin
Re:Technical Issues - reply from Marguerite		Demo Student

Below the table, there are several action buttons: 'Mark as Read', 'Mark as Unread', 'Create Printable View', and 'Delete'. At the bottom, there are 'Move to:' and 'Copy to:' dropdown menus, both currently set to '- Select -', and another 'Create Message' button.

E-Learning Advantage

Students and off-site staff (regional tutors, associate lecturers) were supported within the environment that they were required to learn or support learners.

Key Points for Effective Practice and Barriers

Students and all staff involved (including admin, library, regional/associate/FT academic) need to have their technical support expectations managed. To this end it is important to establish and publish a service level agreement whether that be that initial replies in eg. 24/48hrs.

The changing nature of technical support required by students meant that providing technical support in this manner became a staff burden for very little or no uptake by students. This coincided with the embedding of online course structures, staff skill and changing VLE versions.

Conclusion

With a large amount of online and blended distance programmes to support it was decided that the most practical course was to remove Discussion Boards from course. From there the support provision evolved from an email address with supporting information through to its current state of an online form and a student technical resource base and FAQ site (see overside).

Showcase: Advice Provided

Technical issues

There are two routes you can follow to get technical help and advice. If you are unsure which you should follow, please don't hesitate to contact the eLearning Team at our email.

(1) eLearning Team, School of Education

The School of Education's eLearning Team **is able to assist with the following technical areas, relating to your programme of study:**

- WebCT navigation and usability problems
- CD-ROM issues
- General web browser/WebCT compatibility guidance and advice

We will endeavour to respond to your enquiries **within 48 hours** (although usually sooner), **weekdays only**. Please be aware that we are unable to respond to your enquiries on weekends, Statutory Bank Holidays and University Closed Days.

Unfortunately we are unable to assist with specific software or hardware issues relating to your personal computer.

Look up the answer: <http://www.education2.bham.ac.uk/elearning/>

Contact us on: <http://www.education2.bham.ac.uk/elearning/support/additional-support/request-help.php>

(2) Information Services

The Information Services (IS) helpdesk **can help with:**

- WebCT log on difficulties (usernames and passwords)
- Authentication when accessing eJournals off campus
- Online registration and re-registration

The helpdesk can be contacted on

Phone: 0121 414 7171

e-Mail: helpdesk@bham.ac.uk

Web: <http://www.helpdesk.bham.ac.uk>

The University's Information Services (IS) department is able to assist with ATHENS access and library facilities. For help with accessing eJournals and searching the databases please contact **Insert Name**, School of Education Library, on email@bham.ac.uk

Design Team: Geraint Evans (e-learning manager); Stuart Duke (eLearning Support Officer); Paul Edwards (eLearning Project Developer); Danielle Hinton (Learning Design Consultant);

Contact Information

Geraint Evans

E-Learning Manager

School of Education, College of Social Sciences

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 7186

Email: g.evans@bham.ac.uk

Series Created by Danielle Hinton, College of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham. Last updated: Monday, June 13, 2011

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