Sheffield Hallam University

TALENT
Teaching and learning enhancement

RECOGNITION
VALUES
KNOWLEDGE
ACTIVITY

The Higher Education Academy

SFHEA Case Study Exemplar

7.2 Written Case Study Title:	Minimum Thresholds

This case study reflects on my initiative of introducing minimum threshold standards for the design and use of blackboard sites and module manuals in the xxxx subject group. The virtual learning environment is a crucial part of the staff and student experience and it is fundamental to enhance the utilisation of this important learning and communication tool. In my own practice I have always strived to lead in good practice in this area and to support colleagues in developing their own particular skills. I have been able to demonstrate the range of mechanisms and tools on blackboard that facilitate online discussions, online testing, the ability to link directly through to learning centre materials and more widely to other online material with a particular emphasis on ensuring the quality of the resource and ensuring that this is emphasised at all times to the students and was really focused on enhancing the student experience. **(A1)** The ability to then track student access to these resources was also highlighted which enabled staff to then review their use and effectiveness with real evidence rather than relying on anecdotal feedback at best. This information could then be used to inform module design, curriculum design and delivery pattern strengths and weaknesses in subsequent years. **(A4, K4, K5)**

The National Student Survey and our own quality monitoring highlighted many strengths in the provision of our xxxx programme, but it also identified specific weaknesses particularly around organisation and feedback. The University strategy makes the point that one of its goals is "using digital technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what we do",[1] and it was clear that if the student experience was not to continue to suffer then a fundamental shift in practice needed to be embedded into the subject group, particularly as

---

[1] Sheffield Hallam University, 'Strategy to 2020', at p15

Comment [PT1]: Good to start clearly emphasising that this is their own piece of work.

Comment [PT2]: Could have inserted a reference here to underpin this assertion.

many staff for a variety of reasons viewed the influence of newer technologies in their professional lives with suspicion. To improve matters in these areas, under my leadership, the subject group undertook two major projects. The first was to design a set of minimum standards and expectations for module blackboard sites and the second was a complete overhaul of all module manuals so again they were assessed according to a specific set of criteria and followed a particular structure common across all modules. Both projects really involved similar aims and objectives and also barriers to the possible success of the undertaking. With staff comfort in the use of both blackboard and technology in general varying significantly it was important to:

a) Come to agreement on the principles around site/manual design and use
b) Establish an audit of existing sites and module manuals
c) Create a design template showcasing best practice
d) Ensure ongoing training, support, mentoring and monitoring to ensure sites were able to meet the minimum standards not just at a particular snapshot but through the academic year and beyond.

Dialogue was undertaken with faculty and university TEL teams and LTA coordinators. Student focus groups were constituted to enable the student voice to be heard and to help them shape the provision of service that they receive. The aim was to come to a consensus around optimum site and manual design. It soon became clear that key concerns revolved around inconsistent design and use across modules which left students struggling with the variety and inconsistency that the existing uncoordinated approach had created. Through liaison with course leaders and year tutors and then further extensive discussions with the staff group as a whole, consensus was achieved as to design and format for both blackboard sites and module manuals. In terms of gaining staff support in relation to blackboard site design, I created a graphic demonstration of a poorly designed site, with illogical structure, empty content folders, inaccessible sections and a plethora of out of date announcements which focused minds sharply particularly when such provision was contrasted with the proposed clear template design. **(V3)** The implementation plan involved the creation of several training videos and then dissemination of these to staff. These videos were supplemented by written guides with screenshots where appropriate. **(A1, A2, A3, A5, K4)** Large group training sessions in computer labs were provided in the use of microsoft word

to aid the construction of module manuals and were also provided in relation to the use of blackboard and further dedicated one to one support was provided in advance of more ad hoc at elbow help as and when necessary.

The end result was an enhanced student experience. Student feedback subsequent to the project praised the ease of navigation and the clarity of the design. It noted the newly established consistency across all modules. These were all very positive albeit anticipated benefits. There were unanticipated benefits in the form of the enhanced skills that staff had acquired as a result of the training laid on which made them more confident to stretch to more sophisticated use of blackboard, encouraging and enabling student engagement and group work in particular. Some began to use tests as formative assessment techniques and some began to make use of online marking and feedback rubrics. Staff began to support one another in a very pleasing collaborative manner and encouraged the dissemination of new ideas in relation to the provision and use of blackboard. The sharpening of skills in relation to microsoft word had unanticipated benefits in terms of staff beginning to exploit some of the more complex features in the software but also gave them the confidence to delve more deeply into powerpoint to focus more clearly on enhancing their use of this staple of lecture delivery. The feedback from students following both of these projects has been overwhelmingly positive. As a result of these projects staff became far more confident across a range of uses of technology in their delivery and we have seen a consequential improvement in teaching practice as they have looked to the use of new technologies to enhance and supplement their more traditional delivery. We have seen far more use of podcasts, electronic feedback, audio feedback, screencasts and the use of blackboard collaborate to re-create the seminar environment in the Virtual Learning Environment.[2] The department has been seen as being at the forefront of TEL within the faculty. **(A2, A5, K4)**

Word count: 1070

[2] Cook J., et al 'The design of learning technologies' in Conole G. and Oliver M., (eds) *Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research* (Routeledge) 2007 p56

Comment [PT7]: Once again, although the progress of these projects is clear and well justified, we have no indication of who led or undertook this work.

Comment [PT8]: Good to include student feedback evidence to support the successful outcome of the project.

Comment [PT9]: Although there is no evidence within the writing here to back up his assertions of staff development and confidence, his Referee statements do back up his role in this work.

Comment [PT10]: Overall, this is a good case study that shows a clear problem that needs resolving, a strong project-based approach to resolving it and clear evidence of successful achievement of original aims as well as unintended benefits. It is clear that leadership is present at the project initiation stage, but the study would have benefitted from a more explicit first person indication of **how** the candidate led and influenced the actual project. What was their role and how did they lead?