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ASSIGNation article

Jane Secker
Kris Roger
Centre for Learning Technology
LSE

Learning Technology at the LSE

Introduction and background

In late 1999 the LSE set up the Learning and Teaching Technology Group (LTTG) with two part time members of staff seconded from the IT Services department and the Library. The LTTG working group was set up to oversee the Group, with staff from academic departments, IT Services, the Library, the Teaching and Learning Development Office and central administration. The LTTG's first projects piloted Web and CD-based course delivery approaches for a Master's course in Computer Information Security and use of the web for delivery of study skills resources and teaching development.

The following year the LTTG began providing a developmental learning technology support service to LSE teaching staff. The LTTG support team between Christmas 2000 and 2001 consisted of two 'Learning Technology Specialists' and a half time assistant librarian who specialised in learning technology. The initial support was for four courses, which all received LSE Teaching Development Fund grants to produce web based teaching resources and facilities. WebCT was chosen as the virtual learning environment (VLE) software to deliver online courses.

Since this date the growth in interest from the teaching staff and students has been significant and currently the group is supporting upwards of 20 courses and have another 20 or so in planning and development for the coming year. This success prompted the establishment of the new LSE Centre for Learning Technology in 2002. The Centre Director, Steve Ryan, was appointed in February 2002 and there are now four full time members of staff in the team, including two learning technology specialists, an assistant librarian and a technical administrator.

The Centre aims to aid the integration and use of technology into the main teaching and learning activities of the LSE. Through a number of projects different approaches to providing added learning value for traditionally taught courses are being explored.

The activities of the Centre

Academic departments who wish to introduce learning technology initiatives are encouraged to apply for a grant from the LSE Teaching Development Fund. This money is primarily used to employ a PhD student to act as research assistant working with the academic running the course, and doing much of the detailed "production" work involved in building on-line resources. The Course designer receives technical support from the dedicated team of staff, who also train the research assistants and students, and ensure that the tutors are informed about the variety of ways to exploit this new environment to add value to their courses. A

budget is also available to pay for any resulting copyright clearance fees for the course.

The use of WebCT has enabled students to access the rich selection of internet and electronic library resources associated with their studies, as well as tutor-supplied materials (e.g. lecture notes, PowerPoint slide sets). Bulletin boards have been used to increase opportunities for students to pose questions direct to lecturers, and to promote greater student-to-student interaction. Some students have developed their own web design skills, making web presentations in the place of traditional seminar presentations. Some courses have made use of the online assessment or quiz features available in WebCT and an increasing number of departments are using this environment to deliver audio and video materials.

Electronic course packs are an important library resource that are delivered effectively through the WebCT course environment. Copyright cleared core readings are scanned in-house and the PDF files are stored on a dedicated server in the library. Links to these readings can then be incorporated throughout the WebCT site as appropriate, providing secure access to these resources. The Assistant Librarian for Learning Technology is on hand to advise course designers about the appropriate use of electronic course packs and other electronic library resources they might wish to use. The librarian can also advise about copyright queries when using both digital text and multimedia resources.

Feedback suggests that students appreciate the value of this on-line environment, and it is particularly useful for revision purposes, as they can do quick subject searches of on-line discussions, tutor materials, their personal notes, and other resources embedded in the sites.

An increasing number of teaching staff at LSE are starting to explore the use of WebCT, with projects in departments such as Economic History, Law, Geography, Industrial Relations, International Relations, Sociology and Economics. Future developments in this area include further integration with other LSE information providers such as M.I.S. (e.g. timetables, student records, finance) through the LSEforYou portal system.

Media@LSE

An on-going project that the Centre for Learning Technology have been working on is for a new MSC programme in Global Media and Communications. This programme, launched in the academic year 2000/2001, is a joint project of Media@LSE and the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California (USC). LSE students spend the first year of their studies in London and leave for Los Angeles in time for the start of the fall semester at the beginning of their second year. USC students come to London in the beginning in their second year. In the Michaelmas term of 2001, the programme had four groups of students in two locations.

In an effort to promote the new programme and to tackle the particular challenge of a two-year programme on two continents a number of web based resources were developed. These included a comprehensive, regularly updated web page for the programme; the creation of a WebCT site and the recording and digital processing of

audio-visual material and the provision of online reading materials via an electronic course pack. As with other projects, the department received a grant from the Teaching Development Funds at LSE. The grant enabled the Programme Director, a Learning Technology Specialist and a Research Assistant to collaborate in planning, establishing and maintaining the new web based resources. To further aid communication between the two sets of students, two forms of video conferencing are being employed in the second year. Firstly, a video conference between the two cohorts was arranged to allow the students to discuss their experiences of living in the two cities and to ask questions of their peers and teaching staff. This was the first time that the two groups of students had seen each other. Commercial video conferencing equipment was used over SuperJanet and the Trans-Atlantic connection rather than expensive ISDN phone lines.

The second part of the video conferencing project is to employ low cost web cams and Microsoft NetMeeting to allow the second year students, who are now located in Los Angeles, to hold dissertation consultations with their supervisors at LSE. Testing has been carried out and the first online meetings are currently being arranged.

This is just one of a range of projects that the Centre for Learning Technology are supporting. If you would like more information see:

<http://teaching.lse.ac.uk/tech/>

Contact details:

Centre for Learning Technology
LSE
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE

e-mail: lttg@lse.ac.uk