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Keegan, H and Procter, CT

Title	Peer-to-peer communication between students to facilitate placements
Authors	Keegan, H and Procter, CT
Publication title	ASET Annual Conference: Proceedings of the 2006 Placement and Employability Professionals' Conference
Publisher	ASET
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
USIR URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/12908/
Published Date	2006

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Peer-to-peer communication between students to facilitate placements

Chris Procter, Salford Business School University of Salford c.t.procter@salford.ac.uk
Helen Keegan, Computer Science and Engineering University of Salford
h.keegan@salford.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper describes the use of a discussion board to facilitate discussion between students on placement and those seeking placements. Evidence is presented that this peer-to-peer communication can alleviate some of the obstacles to students either seeking a placement or enjoying a successful placement experience. This is situated in the context of e-learning and placement support.

Context

5 years ago when the author presented a paper at ASET on the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE - specifically Blackboard in this case) to support placements, the use of such tools was relatively novel and there were significant concerns about usability and accessibility (Procter 2001). VLEs have now not only been adopted by the great majority of Universities both in the UK and overseas but in many institutions their use has become obligatory (Brown and Jenkins 2003). Their integration into mainstream teaching is now of more interest than their existence. In 2001 the context was about how to adapt ideas of distance learning to the practice of e-learning. In 2006 the issue is how to achieve an effective combination of web based tools with a more traditional work based or University based experience. This combination is now commonly known as blended learning. The author uses the definition of the verb blend (Collins English Dictionary): to "mix together elements .. to improve quality". The placement experience in particular and work based learning in general offers an excellent opportunity for experimentation with blended learning given that, by definition, placement students can only be supported at a distance. The experimentation described in this paper was conducted as a means of provided added value to the student and did not involve the replacement of face to face support with electronic resources.

Placement take up

In many University departments and schools, a placement year is an option for students to take up between their second and final years. This is the case for many degrees at the University of Salford. However, as in many Universities, we encounter the problem of low take up of the placement year despite the many social, financial, academic and professional opportunities afforded by the experience. This low take up is due to many reasons including:

- a culture of wishing to finish with education as soon as possible
- lack of confidence
- lack of motivation or understanding of the value of a placement
- concern at the idea of living away from home for the first time
- perceived financial or personal costs
- lack of A level grades for specific companies (Morgan 2006)

Interestingly, many similar issues have been identified as reasons for the lack of take up of opportunities for British students to study overseas. Our experience suggests that a VLE can be used to address (although not necessarily solve) many of these issues.

Background

For many years the University of Salford has offered an optional sandwich year on undergraduate programmes. Students on the BSc programmes in Business Information Systems, Business Information Technology and eCommerce Systems can opt to spend the third year of their degree on a paid, professional placement year. The degree programme is of 3 years duration/4 years with placement. The benefits of the sandwich year in terms of improved grades and employment prospects are well established. Despite that, for many years these programmes have experienced the problem of a low take up of placement

opportunities. In 2003 and 2004 less than 20% of eligible students took the sandwich year option.

Since 2000 these undergraduate students have used Blackboard (BB) for accessing placement information. This information has included staff announcements, listings of placement opportunities, contact details for companies and support organisations, proformas and other data concerning past and present placements. In 2002 the author also experimented with using online chat with students on placement which (it has to be said) was an abject failure either because students were not allowed to use chat during working hours, did not want to chat with University staff and students during non working hours (who could blame them), or because the technology wasn't very good.

The author moderated the development of Blackboard at Newcastle University between 2003 and 2004 (Newcastle FDTL 2004) to support students on placement. In focus groups with students during this process it became clear that they would welcome a tool that facilitated communication between themselves and between different cohorts or years of study. This would simply allow students on placement to establish contact with each other and find out what each other was doing, and would allow those from other years to keep in touch with and learn from those on placement. When students go on an optional placement year they are not necessarily friends with other students going on placement although they become thrown together as a group.

Description of the VLE support

The Blackboard site at Salford is for use by both students on placement and students seeking placement. It is used by the placement tutor to provide information and documentation, as well as for peer-to-peer communication between students who are currently on placement and students who are seeking a placement. The six main content areas of the site are: Announcements, Staff/Supervisor info, Future Placements, Placement forms, General Info and Student Experience.

Announcements: The placement tutor regularly uploads announcements to the front page of the site. The announcements section is used for reminding students of deadlines for report and logbook submission, important fees information, and relevant events and competitions (the tutor encourages participation by pointing out the benefits and offering help if required). The tutor also uses the announcements section to congratulate last year's students on their outstanding marks, which helps to motivate students seeking placement.

Staff/Supervisor info: This shows the contact information for staff: placement coordinator, placement support and administration staff.

Future Placements: This section of the site is for students who are seeking a placement. Web links to placement support organisations, useful web sites, funding opportunities, European contacts and various placement opportunities are posted here. The student can also access a database showing companies who have taken students from Salford in the past, and can download sample CVs and covering letters.

Placement forms: This section of the site is for students who are currently on placement. All forms (including interim assessment, interim report, final report, log book) which need to be completed and submitted are posted here.

General Info: This section of the site is for students who are currently on placement. Useful documents are posted here, such as *Getting Started* - a document which outlines the assessment for the placement; the module specification including the breakdown of marks; and various prizes and competitions.

Student Experience: This is a discussion board used to facilitate communication between students on placement and those seeking placements in the hope that peer to peer communication can alleviate some of the obstacles to students either seeking a placement or enjoying a successful placement experience. It provides a mechanism for reporting back issues and observations, limiting feelings of isolation and helping students and tutors to keep in touch. This may be the only way students can interact as a group; therefore it can facilitate a supportive learning environment.

Discussion Board development

23 students went on a work placement during the Academic year 2005/2006. The placements began in the summer 2005, and in September the tutor sent an email to all 23 placement students asking them to log onto Blackboard, select the 'Student Experience' area and to add a new thread named according to the name of their placement organisation, detailing 'where you are/what you're doing/ how you got the placement/ if you're willing to have current second years contact you etc.' The students were given a sample thread which helped them to compose and structure their posts. It was made clear that they were under no obligation to do this, but 21 students responded by posting their experiences on the board, confirming that they were happy to be contacted by students looking for placements. In some cases this took a bit of encouragement! The majority of posts were submitted within 4 weeks. Also some posts were made by students sharing their experiences of looking for placement.

The students concerned were all studying for IT degrees and did not have any issues with accessibility or usability. The majority had extensive experience of the use of online discussion. Two examples of student postings, with names removed, are given below:

Example 1

"Hello! I and xxx are currently on our Placement Year with PricewaterhouseCoopers(PwC). We work in one of our Manchester offices, which is part of UKIT in PwC. ... Our office has about 70 people working in it, who are all very friendly. We are both having a really good time and have really enjoyed our time with PwC so far; we have also had the chance to go down to London a few times already and meet loads of new people. We have even been to a Ball and believe our placement is giving us a great experience.

The process to applying to PwC is very straightforward and is the same as applying for an every day job. We both found out about the placement through Blackboard ... We then began the process of applying by sending our CV and Covering Letter to the company.

We then both got letters asking us to come for an interview and we were required to complete a personality test online before the interview. On the day of the interview we had an interview which wasn't as daunting as we thought it would be and we then had an aptitude test. We were made to feel welcome and we had dinner provided for us where we could meet employees who had been placement students so we could ask questions. It was a very enjoyable day and we got to meet loads of new people. A couple of weeks later we were notified that we had been given the job.

If anyone wants to ask me about anything then feel free to post them on this thread or email us directly at ... and we will get back to you asap.

Or if you click on this link it will take you to the PwC UK homepage where you can learn more about the firm.

<http://www.pwc.com/uk/eng/main/home/index.html>"

Example 2

"Hi All,

I moved down to London to undertake the placement year at ... I say it's very posh old chap...chocks away Henry, Savoy ahoy! Money is everywhere and the wine flows like water.

After only two months I found myself in a very strange predicament indeed, as the

longest standing member of IT staff. I must say it is quite a pleasant experience to have six people waiting outside your office for you to arrive in the morning. So many questions, so many people... It's a wonderful experience and challenge.

My role here has evolved somewhat, shall we say, from being the first line support dogsbody to pretty much running the show. Everyone knows me I know everyone, live is good as they say."

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires and email interviews were used to ascertain the views of students.

Questionnaires

In March 2006 all students who were on placement attended the Placement Presentation Day, and were asked to fill out a research questionnaire which aimed to profile their usage of the BB site, and their use of online technologies within the placement organisation. 12 questionnaires were returned.

Out of 12 respondents, 6 used the BB site weekly, 5 used the site once or twice a month and 1 had only visited the site once. The most used parts of the site were the documents section and the downloadable forms, with 9 out of 12 respondents accessing these areas whilst on placement.

10 out of 12 respondents had visited the 'student experience' forum on BB. 3 commented that they found it useful and interesting to read how everyone is doing. On the basis of their posts on to the 'student experience' forum, 6 of the respondents had been contacted by students who were looking for placements, asking for advice on various matters such as company specific information and interview and application techniques.

9 respondents used email within the workplace as the primary mode of communication, while 3 respondents said that email was only occasionally used in the workplace. 10 respondents used the internet for work purposes while on placement. 4 had taken online training courses as part of the placement. 4 out of 12 respondents mostly communicated with their workplace mentor via email.

Email interviews

In April 2006 all students who posted to the board were sent a brief email questionnaire asking them if potential placement students had contacted them after reading their posts on the BB discussion board. Students were also asked if they had recommended going on placement and their reasons for going on a placement.

12 out of the 15 students who responded had been contacted, mostly by several students. The responses were all favourable with regards to using BB to support placements, and encourage the uptake of placement opportunities:

"I think the discussion board was/is a really good idea. It allows students on placement to see what sort of jobs other placement students are doing as well as allowing them to share experiences."

" I have been contacted by students asking about how well my placement is going after they read my post on BB, and if it is worth it by students who have expressed an interest in doing one next year."

"I have had some final year students asking me if the placement has been beneficial, through MSN or when I came to University for my presentation. They are final year students who chose not to do a placement. I definitely think most of them regret not getting a placement but some of them wanted to get their degree over and done with in 3 years."

"Regarding the use of the discussion board for the Professional Placement Year, I did post a couple of messages but no one emailed me back. However one person did reply to the

message and there has been people reading it and I think that although no one emailed back the information is good for people wanting to find placements.”

”Five students have emailed me with regards to the placement – one of them now has a placement at the same company!”

”I had several emails/queries about my placement, not all were through blackboard though. I had a lot of first years querying and several second years”.

”Most of the students who contacted me now have placements. They were asking general questions like what is the placement like, is the placement worthwhile etc.”

”I recommended a placement for a number of reasons. The main reason was learning how to apply the knowledge gained from uni into a working environment. I also suggested that a placement could give you an idea on what area the student will want to go into. They may find the modules the course covers is not for them or the course perfectly compliments the work they wish to do in future. My advice was to go for a placement. I hope these reasons make sense.”

Students seeking placements were also polled for their views and typical comments were as follows:

”Strengths (of BB site) - Good of students to write up experiences whilst on placement which can be accessed by students who are wondering whether to reply. Good that new placements appear on VLE because some people don’t see them all on other sites. Good that CV and cover letter templates were available.

Weaknesses (of placement support) - No experiences written up on application forms, telephone and video interviews and also assessment days. These would have helped people who no prior experience of job applications.”

Discussion and further work

The use of VLE support for students on placement and those seeking a placement, and in particular the use of a discussion board with outlines of student experience, resulted in very positive feedback. Furthermore the placement co-ordinator had only to make a small contribution as facilitator. This helped address some of the concerns of those seeking placements such as a lack of confidence, motivation or understanding of the value of placements. Somewhat unexpectedly the discussion board encouraged communication amongst students on placement, and between these students and their former colleagues still at University. In a modest way the initiative encouraged the development of a ‘Community of Practice’ (Wenger 1999).

A number of issues need further discussion. These will become especially important if any assessment is conducted of online contributions and include:

- Provision of clear guidelines as to the role of the student and tutor, e.g. frequency of moderation of the discussion by the tutor and expected contributions from the students.
- E-moderation skills required by tutor. For example, a balance has to be established between taking an active role in encouraging and guiding discussions, which can ensure more productive participation and a higher number of students engaging with the topics under discussion, against interfering in areas that students would prefer to discuss in an area not moderated by the University.
- Analysis techniques for peer-to-peer communication.

There is significant further development that can be made. New features recently added to Blackboard, but already familiar to users of other VLEs such as Moodle, can be adopted to support placement students. For example wikis can be used to encourage group working and blogs may replace the traditional log book, as is already being encouraged by ASET. At each stage of development, issues of usability and accessibility need to be considered.

Broadening the use of the VLE placement area to ex-students and employers so that it changes from being an intranet to an extranet is another interesting future possibility.

Postscript

During the ensuing discussion at the ASET conference a number of issues were raised by the audience which are worth mentioning here. There is substantial difference in practice amongst Universities in terms of online (and VLE) support for placement students. In some Universities no online support at all is provided for placement students, whilst in others experiments have been conducted with online video, use of webcams, online chat, and online submission of documentation. Factors influencing this difference include the subject area of the students and staff, the level of technical and training support provided by the host University, and the degree of commitment on the part of the placement co-ordinator.

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