

Conclusions from user feedback on use of a learning platform

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Aim of the project

A great deal of effort and expense is currently being expended in schools and Local Authorities on 'Learning Platforms' (LPs). This study set out to explore how schools and students are using LPs. The report is intended to help inform readers about how teachers are using LPs and to describe students' experience of one mature installation.

Dimensions of the study

Egglecliffe School is an 11-18 Comprehensive School (1450 on roll) in Stockton-on-Tees on the border of Yorkshire and Durham just north of the river Tees at Yarm. The area around the school is relatively affluent and the school is oversubscribed, attracting students from an area far wider than its catchment area. More information is available at <http://www.egglecliffe.org.uk>.

The study findings were drawn from students' questionnaire responses and interviews with students from my own school plus interview responses from teachers across the local authority.

Summary of main findings

- Students in general are very open to using an intranet for their school work
- LPs can transform the management of coursework, marking and feedback
- Speed of access is needed to make the system useful, both off-site and on-site
- LPs offer new ways of teaching and learning rather than merely repackaging the old ones
- Training for staff at a time suited to their teaching pattern is vital for the system to become useful

Background and context

We installed a LP about 5 years ago and have been using it widely for 4 years. More recently, our local authority introduced a remotely-hosted learning platform. Having a facility maintained by someone else in this way has much to recommend it. The

system also has the potential to make collaboration easier between schools in the authority.

The learning platform is now a mature tool for many staff in the school and this summary reports our experience and communicates something about students' perceptions of the system. We wanted to get some feedback about what students felt worked well and what they thought could be improved. We also wanted to understand the range of uses of learning platforms across a range of schools in the LA.

The findings

What did schools use learning platforms for?

We spoke to staff at AST meetings and subject leaders' meetings to see how schools were introducing LPs and what they planned to use them for. We found a wide variety of approaches to LPs and almost as wide a set of acronyms to describe them. From these interviews we concluded that LPs could be classified into three broad areas. Systems often have aspects of all three and the most prevalent aspect in any one system reflects the priorities of the purchaser and purveyor.

Here are the three aspects we identified:

1. *Management information related outcomes.* These systems deliver data to teachers and management and possibly to an LA via management information systems. The focus of this aspect of the system is to enable effective monitoring and evaluation of students' and teachers' work.
2. *Learner focused outcomes.* These systems focus on giving students an opportunity to showcase their achievements. This is rather like each student having a social networking site and teachers creating links to the students they teach. We found primary teachers really liked this type of system.
3. *Lesson or course focused outcomes.* Here the focus is on modeling lessons and courses using a web interface with the students moving from place to place on-line rather as they move from teacher to teacher at school. An advantage of this approach is that it enables efficient storage of resources and enables students to upload their assignments. In this context there may not be such a clear opportunity for students to showcase their own portfolio of achievements but it was popular with secondary teachers who had to manage coursework portfolios for several groups of students on different courses.

How did teachers use learning platforms to support students' learning?

We found that the ways in which teachers used the platform reflected the way in which they had seen it used. Often, a department had picked up a particular aspect of using the platform from a training session or just from another member of staff.

Here are some examples to show how teachers have used learning platforms for enhancing learning:

Providing content:

Students and teachers had access to information documents and links were presented in an order appropriate to the way the teacher

was teaching the course. These were useful for organising courses and could function where the server was based somewhere other than the school.

Managing coursework:

The way this often worked was for students to maintain the latest version of their coursework on the platform. Their teacher marked it and commented using tracked changes and then uploaded this file as a response file to the work the student was doing. The student did not have to look after their coursework. The latest version was always available so students could continue to do the coursework as they waited for the teacher to mark it.

Managing lessons:

Here the lesson resources and activities were treated as sections in the course pages and the teacher maintained the lesson resources in exactly the same place as they used them in class. The system also offered assessment opportunities via quizzes and uploaded responses to exercises. These could be marked on-line without the teacher having to carry paper around. Improvements and new resources could be easily incorporated into the courses without having to reprint courses and manage folders of hard copy.

Peer review:

Teachers specified a set of criteria for assessing a piece of work. Students assessed their own work and some of the other students' work on-line. The final grade was allocated according to a weighting system set by the course teacher.

How did students use their school's learning platform?

I received 418 responses to a student questionnaire (see methods section below) of which 403 were usable. The majority were KS3 responses.

Group	Score	Frequency
All	6	403
Y7	7.5	111
Y8	4.5	129
Y9	4.5	123
Y10	6.5	26
Y11	4.5	14

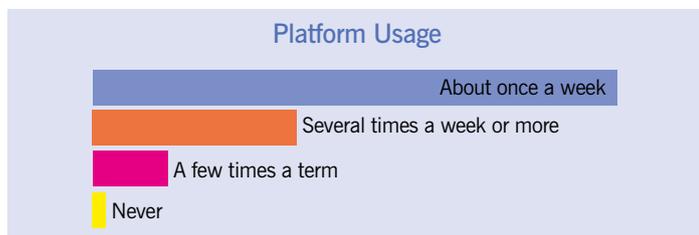
'Give a score to the system'

Students gave the school's system an overall score out of ten. When the results were analysed by year groups it can be seen that the Y7 students were much more positive than Y8 and Y9. (The number of Y10 and Y11 responses was too small to be seen as representative.)

The overall result was an average of 6.5 out of 10, leading me to conclude that students were, overall, fairly positive about the system.

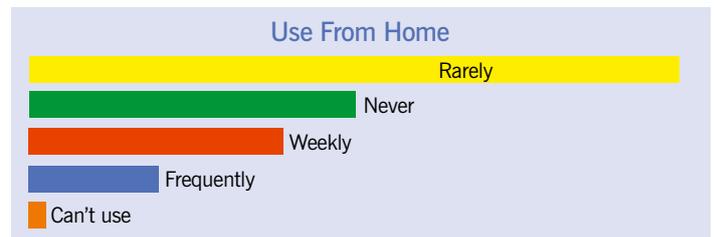
Frequency of usage

Most users accessed the system about once a week.



Use from home

Our survey showed that the vast majority of students can access the platform from home should they choose to. Talking to students who can't access the system we found that the usual issue was very zealous setting on 'Net Nannies' that can block the cookie required to log in and maintain session information. Net Nannies are commonly supplied with home PCs and the default settings can block any form of social networking site. A learning platform is effectively a social networking site so far as a Net Nanny is concerned.



Reasons for accessing the platform

The survey showed that the main use was uploading work or accessing resources and links. Over half of the students surveyed used the learning platform to upload assignments, access documents, download materials or use links, or access materials during lessons. On further exploration we found students particularly valued systems that facilitated uploading of files and sharing the files with other users. In response to a question about social networking we were very surprised at the low response (16 students). In fact we wondered if they thought that social networking was not something they should own up to!



What students said they would like from the platform

Very few students felt that the learning platform was fast enough for their needs. Around a quarter of students returning surveys also wanted the learning platform to support more of their lessons. Specific suggestions from students included:

- having access to applications at home that are available at school and possibly too expensive for most students to buy;
- greater integration of school information into the learning platform e.g. timetable, homework assignments, reports and effort grades, merits etc;
- including more material/content - some teachers do not use the learning platform to enable access to material from previous lessons;

- enabling parents to use the LP for better communication with teachers and better monitoring of students progress; and
- including a search function.

Enquiry methods

In reporting what I have discovered about how teachers and students use LPs I used a number of data collection methods including:

- interviewing staff at AST meetings and subject leaders meetings to see how schools were introducing LPs and what they planned to use them for;
- devising and implementing a six-question web-based survey which was offered to all the school population to complete. There were also two free-response questions. I test-ran the survey before use with the whole school population; and
- interviews with students who had made helpful suggestions in their questionnaire responses.

We asked students how much they had used the LP, where they had used it and what they had used it for. We also gave them an opportunity to ask how they thought the system might be improved in order to make it more useful to them and to their colleagues.

For the interested reader, I have published all the data (anonymised) at: <http://apps.egglescliffe.org.uk/lockwood/survey>

Conclusions and ways forward

If a new LP is being planned, a great deal of work needs to be done in looking at how it is to be used. There is no substitute for looking at what has worked well in a school that you can visit, although teachers should be aware that their school's needs may be very different from those of neighbouring schools.

The way that teachers used the platform suggested to us that staff need to get regular opportunities for training in using the platform facilities. Some aspects of the platforms are so sophisticated that time needs to be spent demonstrating them at a time that fits in with when the teachers are likely to be able to use them with classes. A long lag between training and use can be a real barrier to progress. One teacher using the platform successfully will raise expectation from students that other teachers will deliver the same service. This expectation needs to be managed so that staff do not feel pressured when they might lack confidence.

Access to the system really needs to be as fast as possible for staff and students, as staff often find it difficult to adjust their work practices to accommodate a system 'going down' or being slow at some times of the day. Students are very demanding users and the system must work well or they will not engage with it. In order to get the use of the platform embedded into students' learning we need to offer them easy access from home.

Students are getting used to using computer files to 'carry' work about and they engage readily with on-line access. Learning platforms can help them organise their work much more effectively than they usually manage themselves. In a coursework scenario, uploads to teachers can help students and their teachers track versions of their work effectively and certainly enable them to track versions more efficiently than an email system is likely to allow.

Students are also getting used to collaborative activities via communicating over the Internet. Indications from our survey are that this kind of activity is likely to be popular. Although Internet collaborations are often for activities such as sharing music, it is an activity that is being used in the workplace and is an activity that a learning platform can seek to harness. The latest national curriculum changes explicitly include collaborative working as a required aspect of learning. We are experimenting with using 'wikis' to offer students the opportunity to collaborate on their work whilst also enabling the teacher to track individual contributions, which is difficult to do in traditional classroom contexts.

Suggestions for further reading and references

http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=re&catcode=ss_res_pro_bps_lp_04

www.netmedia-ed.co.uk/netmedia/pdf/learning_platforms_leaders.pdf

Open Source learning platforms.

www.moodle.org/other/icalt2005.pdf

1 Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything by Don Tapscott, Anthony D. Williams - 2006



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All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

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To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk