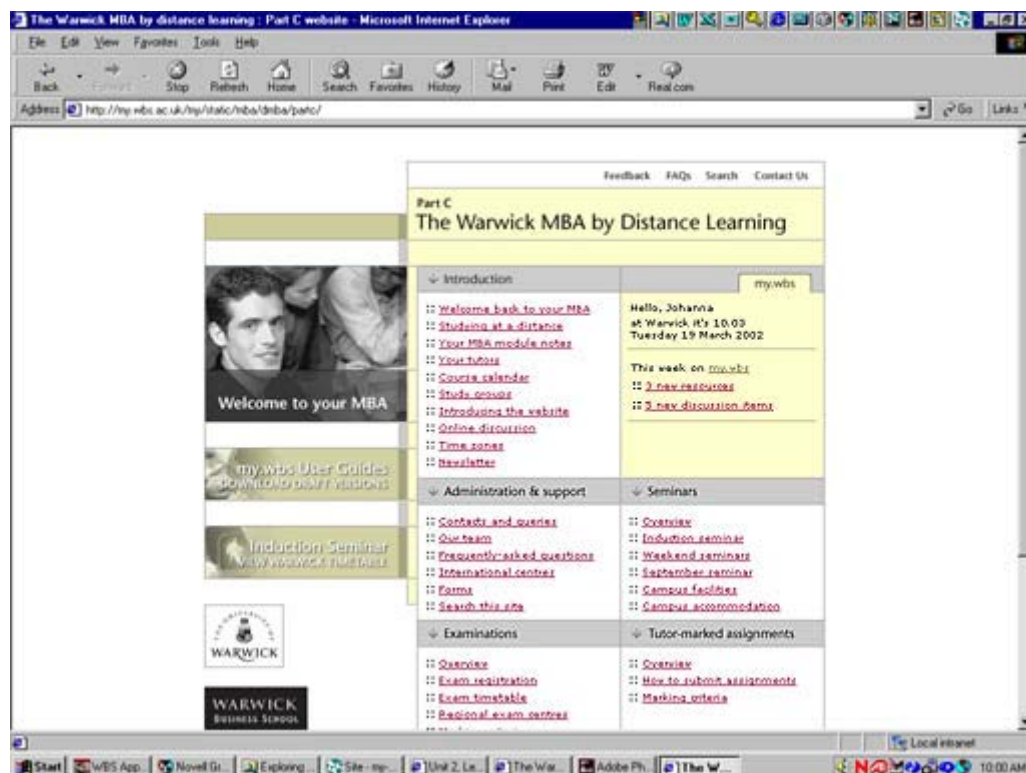


E-Learning: Some Lessons Learned

Laura Quigley, Warwick Business School

So far so good for the MBA by distance learning. We've got online electives bringing students together from over 70 countries. We've got interactive software, active web-based conferences, electronic assignment submission, online libraries and well-trained online tutors. And when 54 overseas students couldn't make it onto campus for their 8 day compulsory seminar, because of the tragic events of 11th September, we replicated it online - posting 90 digital audio summaries with accompanying electronic handouts onto our website, accessible anytime, any place, anywhere.



But is the technology actually distancing us from the objectives of teaching and learning? The Learning Resources Development team is making some progress for the MBA by distance learning – the technology is providing additional communications and delivery tools for those students who in the past have been isolated from the University and each other. Now we're asked to "do something" for the MBA students who study face-to-face. Some are full time, others part-time studying in the evenings or in 5 day blocks. We offered a few suggestions and heads nodded enthusiastically around us, until...

"The students don't like elearning." "They've got enough to do already." "The students don't participate." Some of our academic colleagues looked weary at the prospect. But elearning is a good thing, isn't it? It has to be, it's on computer. The integration of elearning into the MBA is vital to our continuing role. Oh, and to the development of the MBA curriculum, of course.

Time to click the "Refresh" button.

Recently we did some work for a corporation who wanted some of their middle managers to undertake elearning in preparation for a 5 day seminar on strategy and change management. Our recommendations were pretty clear and, we thought, based on common sense:

- keep it web-based so they can access it from anywhere
- keep the file sizes low so it will download easily via a modem

- limit the amount of text on each web-page, which should comprise: academic content or an overview, activities and web resources
- send longer readings in print. Have them also available to download from the website, for ease of access, but don't expect students to print them out to read.
- split students into teams with online tutors to facilitate discussion
- give online tutors plenty of training and support, and tie it in with any existing mentoring systems by appointing mentors as online tutors.
- allow 2 weeks for asynchronous online team building activities before expecting students to engage with the academic content
- design activities that are carefully integrated with the academic content
- don't expect these busy part-time students to do more than 4 hours elearning per week, including reading, online searches and discussion.
- encourage the students to return to and reflect on the online materials after the 5 day face-to-face teaching by having follow-up discussion

Heads nodded enthusiastically round us, and the corporate representatives went back to their company to discuss these plans with those paying the bill. However, within a month this elearning package had been downsized to a 2 page website with too much text and a few readings to download. No tutors, no activities, no printed copy. We already know what the student feedback will be: *"We don't like elearning" "Why couldn't we just have had it in print?"*

How did this happen? Well, we think some of the reasons are as follows:

- The company wanted to be seen to be doing elearning, but hadn't thought through the educational objectives.
- Cost. The accountants presumed that activity online would cost more than static web pages. Actually a little more investment in the design of suitable online activities would have helped the students make best use of the very expensive face-to-face sessions.
- Senior managers weren't willing to invest in training for their mentors to become online tutors – they just couldn't see the benefit. Instead tutors would be brought in from outside to lead the face-to-face sessions at considerable expense both in terms of cost and opportunity cost - how can you encourage long-term change management when the facilitating tutor stays just a few days? Mentors, suitably trained, could have supported change throughout their mentees' professional careers.
- Time. The company felt that their senior managers wouldn't have time to do online discussion. But learning takes time. To learn means engaging with the material, taking time to reflect, apply and interact with the material and sharing the experience of learning.
- Fear - and this I think was the crucial deciding factor. The senior managers were afraid to allow their middle managers (the students in this case) to have control over their own learning. Online discussion would create a shared learning experience that was outside the controlled classroom environment. "What if they misinterpret the message?" "What if they go down the wrong path?" "What if I don't like what they are talking about?"

Availability does not mean uptake. This is true of any development, and we are wary of repeating the mistakes of the past. Think about the hype of the video revolution – "everyone will become lifelong learners, all they'll need is a video player". (For the 21st century, just replace video player with "broadband access".) Educational video was the key to transforming the way people learned.

Video is a wonderful tool, but that's all it is – a tool that must be carefully integrated into a syllabus to have any effect. It can't do the learning or the teaching. For distance learning students, it can provide a welcome break from all that reading. There are certain concepts that video can transmit very well, but it isn't easy to up-date, and it looks dated very quickly. We could record all the lectures on the full-time MBA programme and have copies sent to our part-time and distance

learning students, but who would want to sit and watch all that video? I can't think of anything more boring and less likely to motivate me to learn.

Actually, I can. Sitting on my own in front of a computer screen for hours on end. Our part-time MBA students already spend a lot of time in front of computers while they are at work. What would motivate them to spend as much time again learning using a computer? Or for full-time students, what benefits would a computer give them, when compared with face-to-face lectures where they can interact with people, before, during and after?

What is the experience of learning that they are looking for, and can distance technologies provide that experience?

The Learning Resources Development team is anxious to do research in this area as we continue to develop new materials. We're working closely with colleagues from the Institute of Education, as well as canvassing views from our students and academic staff at Warwick Business School and elsewhere. Our time for research is limited, but we feel the investment is necessary for our students and the curricula, and it gives us the opportunity to share ideas supported by more rigorous study.

The preliminary research is focussing on collaborative online learning for professionals, ie adult learners already working in the field which they are studying, which describes most of our MBA students. We've started by considering our first online elective, in ebusiness. Initial findings suggest:

- The technology is not inhibiting. Students seem motivated to cope with the technology if they are motivated to learn the content. (Though server downtime is a cause for complaint!)
- Time is the key inhibiting factor. Students with limited time quickly learned the most efficient ways of doing group work online, but still found little time to look at optional materials.
- The advantages of online discussion were (1) flexibility – being able to communicate whenever and from wherever – and (2) record-keeping - having the discussion available to review at any time.
- Over 60% of students wanted to use the online elective to get to know people from other cultures. Some moments were truly memorable – the Hong Kong student learning online in the middle of a typhoon; the South African student who had to log off because the copper telephone wires had been stolen. The socialisation process was very important to the learning process. People who had never met already knew each other and could work together by the time they did meet on campus.

How does this compare with face-to-face discussion?

We gathered some data from face-to-face MBA students who studied ebusiness as a 5 day module. They complained that there wasn't enough time for group-work, discussion or reflection in the 5 days, a criticism that did not come from the online students. Face-to-face students spent as much time sharing work experiences and current news as discussing the learning materials provided, but they did spend more time on optional materials. There's a lot more work to be done analysing the data and considering if there are some key performance indicators for success in elearning.

But we already know some of the key motivators to get students to make good use of distance technologies. The motivations to learn are the same whatever the medium, including:

- Clear learning objectives, especially if they meet students' personal learning needs
- Assessment – so far, our part-time students have not made much use of optional elearning materials
- Competition, especially using games - our most popular use of elearning so far is an online reverse auction, with teams of students bidding against each other
- Meeting others taking part in the same learning experience

- Support for learning, provided by good tutors or facilitators to coach students through the process

I mentioned our replicating an 8 day seminar as a series of digital audio files, but of course this did not really replicate the seminar or motivate the students to learn. Here the technology provided the means to deliver necessary resources in a crisis. Had postal services in the US been operating, we could just as easily have posted the materials in print. elearning should offer much more than just a convenient delivery mechanism.

So what is the point of distance technologies in teaching and learning? For students, the technologies can offer a wider variety of learning resources, and the opportunity to learn at their own pace in a learning space shared with people they wouldn't normally get the chance to meet.

For our academic colleagues, we can offer encouragement to use the technologies effectively, just as they would any other teaching tool. It takes time to translate educational content, activities and ways of motivating students into web-based or other electronic forums, but good teaching is good teaching whatever the medium, whatever the distance.

AUTHOR

Laura Quigley

Warwick Business School
University of Warwick

To discuss any issues raised by this article please contact CAP tel: 024 7652 4766 email: cap@warwick.ac.uk