Flexible Learning within MMU: Working smarter not harder

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Introduction
When it comes to teaching and learning within MMU there is no shortage of challenges facing us across the whole student life cycle. They range from those presented by the widening participation agenda - raising awareness and aspirations to anticipating the special educational needs of our students, from improving retention rates to career progression, from ensuring the quality of our teaching to conducting pedagogic research. Amongst these challenges is flexible learning - combining conventional, face-to-face teaching techniques with those used in open and distance learning contexts to provide the most effective and efficient teaching methods - methods that a growing proportion of learners increasingly expect. In terms of flexible learning I'd suggest we are faced with a cluster of questions; they are along the lines of - how do we:

- identify and satisfy academic and professional development needs?
- engage in curriculum design and development?
- explore the potential of the new teaching technologies (and exploit the strengths of conventional teaching methods)?
- encourage our learners to be more independent learners?
- share examples of good practice?

In particular, how do we create time and space to assemble flexible learning materials and give our learners responsibility for part of their own learning? How do we work smarter and not merely harder?

If you are expecting a simple panacea I'm afraid you are going to be disappointed. However, if you are interested in considering
ways in which we may be able to secure some time and resources, benefit from the experience of colleagues, explore some of the above questions and put ideas into practice read on.

**Expectations in Faculty Learning and Teaching Plans**

All faculties within MMU have identified eLearning and Flexible Learning as a priority [for a collection of all Faculty Learning and Teaching Plans see http://www.ltu.mmu.ac.uk]. I interpret these aspirations to mean that colleagues wish to use the most appropriate techniques and media in their teaching – be this online or in a workshop or laboratory, be it in large teaching groups or small tutorials.

Some, like the Faculty of Science & Engineering and Faculty of Humanities and Social Science have actual set targets for the proportion of staff they expect to be teaching online by 2005 – 2006; 40% and 50% respectively. If this expectation is matched across the university it means a three-fold increase in the number of staff teaching online. How could it be achieved? Well, a costed project proposal [see e-Learning Staff Development Project Proposal http://www.mmu.ac.uk/vitael] has been submitted to the Training and Development Unit, Human Resources as part of the work of the VITaE Task Group. If this is supported the university can provide the briefing and training required. Other faculties, like C+A Faculty, have constituted an eLearning Task Group, charged with the task of realising faculty aspirations.

**Identifying and satisfying academic and professional development needs**

A recent survey of academic and professional development needs, conducted within C+A Faculty (Artess and Byrne, 2001) provided baseline data of expressed staff needs; the survey is to be replicated by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science. More specifically, the Audit of e-Learning in CSLE, currently underway [http://www.mmu.ac.uk/vitael], and which will be replicated by C+A Faculty, will provide a basis for the contribution that Visiting Scholar Professor Som Naidu, University of Melbourne will make to flexible learning within MMU. This evidence will be supplemented by that provided from other sources – such as the NATFHE Questionnaire on Online Learning and Models of Technology and Change in Higher Education: An international comparative survey on the current and future use of ICT in Higher Education [http://www.mmu.ac.uk/vitael] and the DOVILES Project - The development, validation and use of a Distance and Open Virtual Learning Environment Scale – being undertaken with the Open University of Hong Kong [http://www.ltu.mmu.ac.uk].

It is hoped that the evidence currently being collected will inform any revision(s) of the briefing and training programme in WebCT, that Rachel Forsyth has developed and which will be offered to colleagues and the training associated with the new high tech lecture theatres, being promoted by the Promethean Centre, and conducted by Robert Ready.

**Curriculum design and development**

There is no shortage of published advice available from MMU colleagues on the production of flexible learning materials (Lockwood, 1994, 1998), on innovations in learning and teaching (Lockwood, 1995, Lockwood and Gooley, 2001) or on staff development in open and flexible learning (Latchem and Lockwood, 1998). By the end of 2003 there will be 40 books in the Kogan Page Open and Distance Learning Series [http://www.kogan-page.co.uk] and over a dozen in the Studies in Distance Education Series published by Routledge [http://www/tandf.co.uk] with no shortage of paper based and online journals in the field [http://www.mmu.ac.uk/services/library].

However, a little assistance can be better than a lot of advice. In an attempt to provide a combination of advice and assistance on Alternative Methods of Producing Teaching Material [see http://www.ltu.mmu.ac.uk] the Learning + Teaching Unit has assembled a programme of seminars and workshops, games and simulations designed to enable colleagues to transform existing materials into flexible learning materials using the most appropriate media. The programme seeks to explore the strengths of conventional teaching practices, the potential of the new teaching technologies and to encourage our learners to be more independent learners.
The intention is to work with colleagues in a number of departments to transform a small amount of teaching materials into flexible learning materials. This small amount representing a cluster of learning objectives that relate to formative or summative assessment materials in the course. During 2003 – 04 it is expected that accounts of these transformations will be Showcased in a university wide seminar; illustrating how it is possible to work smarter and not merely harder.

Potential of the new teaching technologies (and strengths of conventional teaching methods)

At the present time there is an explosion of flexible learning courses and particularly elearning courses nationally and internationally. The International Centre for Distance Learning (iCDL) [http://icdl.open.ac.uk] has assembled and maintains a database of over 35,000 distance learning courses from over 1000 institutions in 100 countries. There are courses available from Accountancy to Zoology – and numerous subjects in between. Subject areas that were once thought could only be taught in a conventional seminar, laboratory, workshop or clinical setting are now delivered in other ways. It is possible to follow a distance learning course in Perfumery or Acupuncture and flexible learning courses in Sport and Exercise Science or Midwifery – the scope is enormous. Other databases, such as Distance Learning Course Finder have a record of 60,000 elearning courses offered by 131 countries [http://www.dlcoursefinder.com]. The database reveals that one can study for an MBA from the University of Athabasca or Indira Gandhi National Open University, from Monash University or Harvard – or an online business course from the 2700 currently on offer [http://www.mba-course-finder.com].

In terms of exploiting the strengths of conventional teaching methods the university is fortunate to have an Institute of Education that provides Post Graduate Certificate in Education courses; courses that provides advice and assistance to colleagues on teaching methods and student learning. It is also fortunate to be a focus for innovative work within the Promethean Centre – exploiting the communicative power of the new lecturer theatres and the opportunities these provide. More independent learners

The revolution in the actual delivery of teaching materials in higher education over the last thirty years has been accompanied by a similar revolution in teaching methods – from exposition, typified by the Sage on the Stage to constructivism typified by the Guide on the Side. The technology and teaching methods have enable learners to take a more active role in their learning, to reflect upon their learning and take responsibility for it. The increasing use of formative assessment material (Lockwood, 1992, Tessmer, 1993) have sought to involve the learner more in the learning process – getting them to monitor their progress, check their understanding, think for themselves.

The introduction of Personal Development Planning and Student Progress Files (required for all accredited courses in 2005/06; see also the article on page 9 of this issue by Trevor Williamson) will mark another significant milestone in this movement. Pilots in Faculty of Art & Design, Faculty of Science and Engineering and in the Business School are showing encouraging results and serve to confirm those noted by David Gough, Head of the Research Team commissioned by the LTSN to address the question: What evidence is there that processes that connect reflection, recording and action planning improve student learning? The team reviewed published research in the area and Gough stated that a “wide range of positive outcomes were reported including: improved practical and cognitive skills, attitudes to learning and reflection, knowledge of learning styles and improved autonomy and achievement.” (THES, 14 March 2003, p9)

Sharing examples of good practice

There is no shortage of Good Practice within MMU – the problem is being made aware of it. The work of faculty Learning and Teaching Committees in mounting workshop and seminars programmes is to be applauded – as is the mounting of Faculty Learning and Teaching days. The most recent Business School Learning and Teaching day (or rather two days) was devoted to elearning and flexible learning. The forthcoming C +A Faculty learning and teaching conference will have a theme of elearning and flexible learning. The Annual
Staff Development programme offers an array of events. This issue of *Learning and Teaching in Action* is devoted to Flexible and Life Long Learning. The MMU Research Data Base [http://www.rdu.mmu.ac.uk] will document all published research by staff and the associated Pedagogic Research Data base will record both published and ongoing work in the field. In the last academic year four books *The Open Classroom: Distance Learning in and out of schools* (Bradley, 2003), *Delivering Digitally* (Inglis, Ling and Joosten, 2003), *Reusing Online Resources* (Littlejohn, 2003) and *Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning* (Simpson, 2003) were edited at MMU and published by Kogan Page, London. We are getting better at sharing and disseminating our good practice.

**Conclusion**

There is growing expertise within MMU in the design and delivery of flexible learning materials. It's my hope that the current surveys of training needs will provide us with the evidence of those needs and that we can draw upon the expertise within the university to satisfy them. The small scale transformations of existing, conventional teaching materials into flexible learning materials, are designed to provide colleagues with the skills to extend this transformation to other parts of their course. It is hoped that this will lead to a progressive move to more efficient and effective teaching - and to a realisation of faculty Learning and Teaching Plans. In this context, my goal is to help colleagues meet the same learning outcomes but to do so with less direct context thus releasing them to engage in other scholarly activities. I believe this to be an achievable goal and one that would enable us to work smart not merely harder.

**References**


