ENABLING ONLINE CASE-BASED LEARNING FOR MANAGEMENT STUDENTS USING BLACKBOARD

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KEYWORDS:

The project developed a directed/supported online case study for 33 internationally-dispersed, distance learning MBA students using the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE). The activities included:
•Devising, designing and producing a case study classroom using Blackboard.
•Publication of a case study that could be used on the project.
•Development of student resources that could be used on the project.
•Implementation of a student application process.
•Co-ordination of associate tutors and Faculty.
•Monitoring of student diaries.
•Establishing evaluation system comprising depth interviews, course statistics, user statistics, questionnaire of user attitudes and observation of online behaviours.
•Development of an article to discuss the implications of the study.

1. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The project produced mixed results in terms of the student experience of the delivery of the online case study. The experience however has been highly successful in terms of learning for tutors and the Department. The project achieved the following:

•The goals of the project were to produce a structured methodology (e.g. format, suggested guidelines, specimen documentation) for running future online case discussions. This was successfully produced.

•A robust methodology was developed for establishing student needs/hopes/expectations and this was deployed to enable effective data gathering.

•A student reflection device (student diaries) was generated via Blackboard discussion forums to provide a mechanism for student reflections.

•An experiment with Salmon's 5 stage model for e-learning.

A total of 36 students applied to take part in the case study, 33 enrolled. In addition to the sponsor, 3 associate tutor moderators were involved in the case study. Technical assistance was provided by Dr. Jie Shen in the Computer Centre. Additional funding was kindly provided by Prof. Salmon.

The project resulted in a feature in ULMC Quarterly newsletter , the development of an academic article by Dence & Higgins (in preparation) and a test bed for future e-tivities on Backboard for Masters level students. In addition the following materials were produced:

•Briefing Notes
•Task Briefs
•Moderator Materials
•Aide Memoire
•The Mandarin Oriental Case Study written by Roger Dence and Alva James, with contributions by Hilary Lindsay (2006)
•Student Application Form (attached)
•Student Questionnaire (attached)
•Case Study Orientation Breeze presentation
•Information on case study moderators

2. EVALUATION

The online case study experiment was instigated due to the growth of the use of the internet by the Department in supporting distance learning. Until 2005, the department approached distance learning through the correspondence course format, with a heavy reliance on hardcopy materials. The department had used the internet to provide discussion forums for nearly a decade but the limitations of the software and questions over internet download speeds prevented further incorporation of the internet for study support development. There was also confusion amongst students about CFS and Athens usernames and the services available.

The adoption of Blackboard by the University enabled the department to reconceptualise the use of the internet for delivering distance learning programmes and to move from a discussion board format to study support and programme enhancement. In Spring 2005 the Management Centre launched two Blackboard sites for the MBA programme. The sites were organised to accord with the specific needs of the students at a particular stage of the programme. Thus one site was designed for study support for the core and elective modules and one site for dissertation support. Within 18 months, in excess of 3000 students were registered on each of these sites.

Due to the number of students enrolled and the uncertainty over how the software and infrastructure would cope with this number of students, Blackboard was used for module material support material and discussion forums rather than providing administrative infrastructure. The e-learning strategy for the Management Centre has been to familiarise students with the use of technology to aid learning, providing an easy-to-use learning repository that develops and expands upon the module materials. Online socialisation has been developed through discussion boards, with over 70% of the student activity on the VLE focused around such boards.

The challenge was to identify viable ways of facilitating effective learning through peer-to-peer interaction. The aim of the online case study project was to develop the capability for providing study support and online interaction through case-based learning using the Blackboard VLE. With further development, it may provide sources of differential advantage versus other distance learning MBA providers that utilise VLEs but do not maximise the potential for enhancing the student experience.

The online case study was chosen because it offered an opportunity for the Department to explore the potential for a more involved approach to e-learning. Many distance learners enjoy limited opportunities for interaction with fellow students or with teaching faculty. The enhanced use of the VLE for structured teaching and learning activities will embed technology as an integral part of the delivery mode, rather than as an appliqué or extra dimension to it.

During the autumn semester 2005 a team of 3 moderators were recruited and the online case study and Blackboard structure was devised by the department in consultation with the lead moderator. The structure of the Blackboard site involved the construction of an entry point located on the main menu of the MBA site. The case study was written around an international hotel chain, providing an organisational context that all students could comprehend. The structure of the Blackboard site was designed to build upon the hotel theme, with the use of a lobby, a reception, café, main conference room, break out rooms and a diary room. Access beyond the lobby was through a system of group privileges on Blackboard to enable those who were participating in the case study to be free of observation from the wider MBA student community. The syndicate group rooms and diary rooms were also subject to further group privileges.

The online case study was advertised in autumn 2005 through announcements on Blackboard and circulation of a flyer leaflet to agency partners. Students were required to apply to participate on the case study and a clearly stipulated entry requirement linked to progress on the programme was set. An application form was provided for students to complete. A deadline of early January was advertised with successful applicants informed 20th January 2006. 36 applications were received and all applicants that provided a completed application form were accepted.

A Note on Method

A case study method (Yin 2003) was adopted for the project research with triangulation of data undertaken through the employment of observation, survey and depth interview research tools. Blackboard provides the opportunity for administrators to gather highly detailed information on online student usage and behaviour through the Course Statistics and Track Views functions. Each folder and item on the Online Case Study was registered for Statistics Tracking.

There are serious moral issues for educators in the use to which Blackboard's surveillance tools are used. The disclosure of what is being monitored, how it is being monitored and the use the data is put does need to be discussed with those seeing and those seen. This ability to see without being seen places the site administrator in a position of hierarchical power and parallels could easily be drawn with the metaphor of panopticon. However, students were informed at the beginning of the project that data was being collected with the understanding that it would be for research and evaluation purposes.

There does need, however, to be an appreciation of the limitations of the surveillance data that Blackboard generates. The statistics collected through tracking are not entirely reliable and are open to interpretation. According to Blackboard, a 'hit' is defined as:

"Please note that, when viewing reports that include hit or access statistics, a hit is tracked every time a request is sent to the Blackboard Learning System. For example, when tracking use of the Communication Area: a Student accesses the Communication area (1 hit), clicks Discussion Boards (2 hits), clicks a forum (3 hits), and clicks a message to read (4 hits)."

https://blackboard.le.ac.uk/webapps/bbcms/portfolio/viewPortfolio.jsp?pid=_131_1

If all items in a folder have the tracking turned on, they all will record a hit if a user clicks the folder to view the page where all items are displayed. For this reason, tracking can only be effectively undertaken at the folder level.

Due to the limitations of the tracking and course statistics, a pre-event survey and a post-event survey were undertaken (LaBay & Comm 2003). The pre-course survey was incorporated into the application form and provided information on student demographics and motivation. The post-event survey was more detailed and was focused on the experience of the case study and student expectations and 'satisfaction' with the experience (confirmation/disconfirmation). The post-event survey was emailed to all applicants at the end of the case study event. A series of follow up emails were sent to maximise the response rate.

During the case study, a small number of face to face depth interviews were undertaken with the applicants. These interviews were restricted in number due to the global spread of the cohort and secured on an opportunistic basis arising from other teaching activities involving the students concerned.

Data Analysis

The case study was scheduled to begin at the end of January 2006. Unfortunately due to late arrival of many students the case study process began two weeks late.

36 students applied to take part in the case study. All 36 students were accepted; however at the launch of the case study 33 students were registered to take part. The group comprised of 14 female and 19 male students. The mean age of those who were registered was 37 with a range of 26-55 years of age, with the following breakdown by age categories:

Age category	Frequency
26-29	4
30-39	16
40-49	11
50+	2

The nationalities of those who were registered for the case study was broadly representative of the department's overall distance learning MBA cohort with groupings of students resident in the Caribbean, Africa, Dubai and Hong Kong. A breakdown of nationalities and details of where they were resident is provided below:

Nationality	Frequency	Frequency of those not resident in country (actual country of residence).
British	3	1 (USA)
Canadian	4	1 (Hong Kong)
Chinese Hong Kong	1	
Dominican	4	
Egyptian	1	1 (Saudi Arabia)
Ghanaian	4	1 (UK)
Indian	2	2 (1 UAE & 1 British Virgin Islands)
Jamaican	3	
Kenyan	1	
Malaysian	1	
Nigerian	3	1 (Canada)
Palestinian	1	1 (USA)
Sri-Lankan	2	
St.Lucian	1	
UAE	1	1 (Nigeria)

To be considered for the online case study group, members had to have completed Module 1 units 1-3 and to have sat or be in the process of sitting the Module 1 examination. If a student was following the programme schedule a student can reach this point after 6 months of study. There is a maximum registration period for the MBA of 60 months. The composition of the case study group indicated that over 88% of members had been on the programme for 2 years or less.

All but one member of the group was employed. The mean length of service with the current employer was 5.6 years, with 10 members in employment with the same employer for 6 years or more and an equal number had been employment for less than 2 years.

The motivations for joining the case study and benefits being sought were reviewed at the application stage and then again at the final end of case study questionnaire. A range of motivations were apparent, with 30% of the statements espousing a wish to contribute a personal skill or ability to the case study. This skill or ability was often a technical skill, e.g. numeracy, knowledge of information technology or statistics. Nearly half of the students were also keen to promote their business experience, focusing on their time in business, breadth of experience or their seniority within an organisation. There was also a strong theme of student's offering their inter-personal skills and ability to work across national/ethnic cultures with 40% of the students identifying this motivation.

There was less clarity from the students in the benefits being sought from their wish to participate and their expressed motivations, with only 14 students providing a response to this question on the application form. Of these 14 students, 5 were keen to enjoy a closer relationship with the University, seeing the online case study as a means of achieving this. Interestingly all of those students who required a closer relationship were existing heavy/medium users of Blackboard and so were already familiar with the University and the support systems. Whilst desiring a closer working relationship, their actual contribution to the online case study was limited. Whilst 4 of these 5 students registered hits on the case study, only 2 people actually sent a message to a forum. This desire of student's for proximity and belonging with the institution whilst demonstrating an unwillingness to engage in participation and contribution is something that will need to be returned to.

Whilst 33 students registered for the online case study project, 8 students failed to join the case study a 25% shortfall in attendance that placed a higher burden on those did that join to sustain discussions online. The composition of this 'no-show' group is useful to document. Of the 8 students, 4 were male. The mean age was 42 and 75% had been on the course for less than 2 years. The previous use of Blackboard as part of their studies indicates that only 1 individual was a heavy user, 4 were medium or light users and 3 had never used Blackboard before. Experience of Blackboard did appear to be a useful indicator of whether the student will register and participate on the case study, suggesting that user profile information has a role to play in student selection and allocation for collaborative online working

With nearly 3000 MBA students registered on Blackboard at the time of the case study, the mean visits to Blackboard of all students is only 226 (June 2006). When we look at the use of Blackboard by those who are registered for the case study we can see that the mean of the online case study group is 1381 visits. Using the overall mean visit to calculate heavy, medium and light usage, with heavy

users recording 50% more visits than the mean, with light users recording 50% less visits than the mean we can begin to group the users by their usage of Blackboard.

Profile of Usage Groups

Type of User	Frequency
Heavy	19
Medium	7
Light	4
Non-user	3

The relationship between Blackboard usage and registration for the online case study is not surprising. It can be assumed that the above average usage enables a high degree of familiarity with the technology, plus they will have enjoyed a higher opportunity to see the original advertisement promoting the online case study. Whilst caution is expressed due to the small sample size the composition of these usage groups is worthy of note, in particular the potential significance of gender and usage.

PROFILE OF USAGE GROUPS

	Heavy (n=19)	Medium (n=7)	Light (n=4)	Non-User (n=3)
Gender	72% male	71% male	25% male	100%
Mean Age	36	34	45	40
Nationality	42% North American 21% African 21% Far East	29% British 29% African 29% North American	50% African	All North American
Employed (mean)	4 years	6 years	13 years	4 years

Participation & Contribution to the Online Case Study

There were four discussion forums on the Blackboard site. The Café, which was the social hub and welcoming forum, the Main room where tasks were distributed and student reports presented, the syndicate group rooms where the groups were to discuss the tasks and finally the individual diary rooms where students were supposed to spend time reflecting on the experience and process of

learning. Whilst all of the forums were closed to non-participants, there was further control of the syndicate group and diary forums to limit membership to individuals thus ensuring privacy for individuals and the syndicate groups alike. Overall within the forums 11303 hits were received.

The breakdown of these hits by forum and mean by individual and forum is provided below.

Frequencies of hits per forums

	Main Room	Cafe Room	Syndicate Room	Diary Room
Overall	5132	2583	3180	408
Mean	155	78	76	12

The frequencies and individual student means do highlight that there was a concentration of activity on the main room and chat room forums. This is perhaps surprising considering the role of the syndicate group forums for task directed discussion.

When this data is explored further however the impact of non-participation becomes apparent, as already noted. 8 students failed to register one hit on the Main discussion room and 19 students registered less hits than 150 hits. A similar pattern was evident in the Café. The level of hits registered for the syndicate room was clearly well below that which was expected and considered necessary for group task driven activities. 10 students failed to register one hit in the syndicate group rooms and 21 students registered less than 70 hits. Across all three forums a small group of students were more active in terms of frequency of hits.

The diary room was designed for students to reflect on the group work and their input into the case study. The very low individual mean for this forum was disappointing and may be indicative of the issue of praxis raised earlier. It also exposes an issue of gender and the use of the forums. Women were the most frequent users of the diary room, averaging 16 hits in the diary room in comparison to 9 hits for men.

Whilst the data from Blackboard does offer some indicative information on usage, the methodology of the system's data collection does require caution to be expressed in the use of such data. The hits data also fails to take into account the student's contribution to the discussions. To compensate for this, the frequency of posting and the word count of the postings were calculated. Whilst admittedly this offers only a partial explanation of 'contribution', it can offer a clearer picture on the way in which student's approached the forums of the case study.

Further research will incorporate a discourse analysis of the narratives evident within the discussion forums using Heckman and Annabi (2002) coding scheme. Initial data analysis of the text does appear to indicate patterns in the messages being posted. A couple of trends include: (i) the self promotion message, (ii) the copy cat message, which repeats an earlier post or responds only to affirm the message and (iii) the 'I'm here' message. Initial analysis indicates that there was very little discussion, several students would post long messages in which the initial analysis for the task was

undertaken, this often had the effect of cauterizing further discussion and intimidated other members of the discussion forum who perhaps felt that they had little more to contribute or who may have lacked the confidence to challenge or confront the views first presented.

All students were invited to introduce themselves in the café at the beginning of the case study. Of the 33 students, only 17 students introduced themselves, 9 students failed to view the Board. Excluding the messages from the Tutors, there were only 0.6 messages per student and the average word count per message was 111.75. Women had a greater propensity to introduce themselves with .714 messages per person in comparison to .526 messages for men. Women however were less inclined to write length prose in such introductions, with a mean of 95.5 words per message in comparison to 123.7 words for men. There was also some variation amongst the nationalities with students from the Far East most likely to write a message and for that message to be relatively long.

Regions & Café Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
Africa	0.428	128
EU	0.6	122
Far East	0.8	153.2
Middle East	0	0
North America	0.6875	103.75

Unsurprisingly there was a strong correlation between a student familiarity with Blackboard and the frequency of message and length of message. Students who were classed as heavy users were twice as likely to write a message on the café forum and for that message to be twice the word count of those classed as medium users.

User Profile & Café Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
Heavy user	0.894	164.1
Medium user	0.428	81.4
Light user	0	0
Non user	0	0

There was no contribution on the Main Forum from 20 students and 5 students posted only one message. 8 students failed to view the Forum. The mean for messages to the Board was 1.6 messages, thus the resulting 8 students were highly active. On average each student posted 334.4 words overall to the forum, with the mean message being 201 words in length. The lengthier and greater numbers of messages were from men, with men posting an average of 445.6 words to the forum, a mean of 206 words per message, in contrast to women's 183.5 words per person to the forum. Once again there was some difference in contribution across nationalities with students from the Far East posting most frequently and with lengthier contributions.

Regions & Main Room Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
Africa	1.4	267.1
EU	2	383
Far East	4.8	855
Middle East	2	14
North America	0.875	232

The Syndicate Group forums were designed to function as online breakout rooms. Accordingly, they should have been the site of frequent and intense activity as the group discussed the task at hand. In practice, these forums were used infrequently and rarely for the purposes of intra-group discussion. Of the 33 students, 10 students failed to view the forum, 26 failed to contribute to the Syndicate Group forums. 31 postings from students were recorded, with a mean word count per message of 107.4 words. Men were once again more likely to have posted a message (1.105) in comparison to women (0.714) and these messages were more likely to be longer (mean word count per message of 161.2 in comparison to a mean word count for female senders of 34.42). Debate within the forum was also dominated by three nationalities, with students from Africa posting most frequently and with larger word counts per message. The only contributors to this forum were those classified as 'heavy users' of Blackboard.

Regions & Syndicate Room Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
Africa	1.714	241.4
EU	0	0
Far East	1.4	174
Middle East	0	0
North America	0.75	61

The Diary Room was the site for individual students to reflect on their experience of participating on the case study. Each student was provided with a Diary Room and a Tutor was assigned to each student based on the latter's membership of a syndicate group looked after by that tutor in their primary role as moderator... The Diary room received only 408 hits through the duration of the project. 15 students registered no hits on the diary. Only 12 messages were posted to the diary room and these originated from only 5 students. The average word count per message was only 32.8, with women being more likely to post and to post longer messages (mean frequency 0.642 and mean word count 48, in comparison to a mean frequency of 0.157 and mean word count of 21 for men). Interestingly the frequency of posting and the mean word count increased with age until the 50-59 age category was reached. There was also a marked correlation with nationality which may indicate a greater willingness on the part of certain cultures to engage with reflection as part of the learning process.

Age & Diary Room Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
25-29	0.25	13.25
30-39	.312	32
40-49	0.54	47.1
50-59	0	0

Regions & Diary Room Discussion Forum Frequencies

	Frequency mean	Word count mean
Africa	0.285	51.2
EU	1.3	53.3
Far East	0.2	10.6
Middle East	0	0
North America	0.312	32

Time & Schedule

So far we have seen that student participation on the case study was relatively poor and that contributions to certain parts of the online case study project were less than expected. There is also the temporal dimension that is significant here. The case study was designed to be time limited exercise. It was originally due to commence in early February and end in May with a schedule of exercises throughout this period.

The reception area was designed to be an entry point into the case study, it was therefore envisaged that the hits on this part of the case study would quickly fall away as people moved to the café and then to the main rooms and syndicate rooms. The reception room experienced a spike in the number of hits on day one of the case study, this fell before further spikes that link in with when reminders were sent to all students to log in and join.

It was expected that the café would experience an initial rush of participants as students socialised and experimented with the discussion forum. The initial days saw hits fluctuate between 50-100 hits per day, this figure slowly dropped, as was expected, to 10-30 hits per day.

The traffic on the Main Room and Syndicate Rooms was expected to remain stable throughout the case study, with peaks when tasks were released and when deadlines for reports were approaching. Crucially, the hits on the Main Room quickly dropped from an initial fluctuation between 50-120 hits per day in the first three weeks to a 10-100 hits in March to 10-30 hits per day fluctuation pattern from April onwards. A more pronounced pattern was evident with the Syndicate Rooms. During February the syndicate rooms enjoyed a range of between 15-90 hits per day, this range narrowed to 10-80 in March, falling again to 10-40 in April and then from May onwards the range was 0-15.

The high number of students who failed to join the case study on the scheduled date and the consequent delay in the schedule to accommodate these laggards clearly impacted upon those students who had joined the case study on time. The initial enthusiasm of the early joiners was not harnessed effectively and the remainder of the case study was perhaps never able to recover from this although such early joiners were arguably those who sustained their interest for the longer

period. This difficulty and sense of frustration that it engendered can be seen quite clearly in the feedback received from those who did take part in the online case study.

Student Evaluation of the Case Study

The post case study evaluation questionnaire was sent to all 33 students who applied to take part in the case study and who registered. 11 questionnaires were received, a response rate of 33%. This response rate is low considering the membership relationship of the student with the University. An analysis of the non-response rate indicates that men were more likely to respond than women to the question (response rate of men 37% compared to a response rate of 29% for women). Those students aged 30-39 accounted for 64% of those students who did not respond, with only 13% of this age group returning their questionnaires. There was a similar skew in the non response for students from North America with 60% of those who did not respond classified as North American. Unsurprisingly those students who failed to participate or contribute to the case study did not complete and return the evaluation survey.

Response Rates to the Evaluation Survey

Age	Response Rate	Nationality	Response Rate	Blackboard Usage	Response Rate
25-29	75%	Africa	43%	Heavy users	58%
30-39	13%	EU	33%	Medium users	0%
40-49	55%	Far East	60%	Light users	0%
50-59	0%	Middle East	50%	Non users	0%
		North America	19%		

Despite the low response rates, those that did respond were predominantly the main contributors to the case study. The survey allowed the opportunity to probe a little further into what was actually expected of the case study by the students and to see whether those expectations had been realised during the course.

Most students appear to have conceptualised the case study as a task based exercise, likened to "Short assignments, discussions" (msh16) where the case study would be presented and tasks provided which promoted discussion. This element of discussion between the students was seen as significant, one student noted the expectation of "live interaction between students" (tyaw2). There was also an expectation amongst several students of a very involved Tutor role (rather than Moderator role) as part of this process, "I expected that the activity would progress with increased guidance and moderation from the tutors who I expected to consolidate all the information given and provide the final word agreeing or disagreeing with the views put forth." (dol1), this central role of the Tutor was expressed as "three dimension interaction" (stml1).

The precise role that students conceptualised for themselves was perhaps less onerous and less challenging. One student encapsulates this with a sense that their contribution should ride off what others have already produced, she wrote: "I expected to read the case study (several times), think about the questions raised, keep up with contributions from other students and be ready to feed in my own thoughts." (rmh21). Amongst some students there was also a perception that their contribution was solitary and reactive. This was expressed as "Post my opinions on the case study" (msh16) or a sense that they would contribute "the most from my knowledge and experience" (stml1).

These type of responses suggested that the student was responsive to a signal and that in response to this signal they would draw from their own experience to proffer a contribution. This is perhaps interesting, because although students perceived the importance of interaction and cultural appreciation, there was little insight from their responses that they acknowledged the labour required to enable this interaction. The following quote from (dol1) captures the above sentiments quite well, the use of the "for" rather than "with" is perhaps significant, "I expected more participation for the students. More like personal assignments for each which would be posted after each assignment then the moderators sift through and give direction."

The need for the case study to fit in around other events or activities in a student's life was also apparent; "I expected to be able to participate actively depending on when an assignment was available." (sd131). When students were being encouraged to join the case study, three students contacted the Moderators to inform them that work commitments were preventing them from taking part. The time a student felt necessary to commit to the case study ranged from 2 – 10 hours, with a mean of 4 hours. One student admitted that they did not really have any expectation of how much time would be necessary.

Generally the students who responded to the questionnaire had mixed feelings about whether the case study met their broad expectations, with 1 student stating that the case study met their expectations "adequately", whilst 8 students thought it met their expectations "to some extent" or "quite well". When asked to develop their view on expectations, several of the students noted the benefits received from learning from other students; in particular they enjoyed experiencing the different thought processes they perceived in the exchanges "I benefited from a rare opportunity to exchange views with students from diverse backgrounds and also learn from some pretty good ones" (dol1). The apparent lack of contribution from many students was however seen as an reason for why expectations were not always met, with students noting "lack of contributions from group members" (wc21), "not enough experience sharing" (tyaw2) and "Disappointed by the lack of response, and the fact that there seem to be less participation with interest in the case" (yhk1). One student perceived that the Tutors could have been more involved "Low tutor involvement left me not fully confident that I had grasped fully the whole concept of analysing case studies." These comments do seem to indicate a preference amongst students for being taught how to answer the questions rather than learning through doing.

These explanations however illuminate a series of complexities surrounding the student perception of the online case study. On the one hand the students want the activity to be compulsory for all students, assessed, competitive and to be structured along a strictly maintained and relatively quick time frame, with high levels of Tutor involvement. However they also refer to the need for the

activities to be tailored to their situation as "working professionals", thus "a week is too short of a time frame for completion of tasks and feedback on other groups' tasks. 2 wks is more practical." (kp105). This places an impossible burden on the Tutor role to move beyond moderation of student discussion "I felt that the best a student can get out of this is if the tutors played a greater role in each students' personal learning. Remember that we are distance learning students and have little benefit of tutor-student interaction." (dol1). Despite this, participation and involvement from the majority of students was very low.

User friendliness & Structure

The online case study was set up as a component of the main MBA Blackboard site. It was accessed via a link on the menu bar and after a welcome page which was open to all members of the MBA Blackboard site, access was controlled via the username. From the menu bar the student was offered 5 'rooms', each employing the 'hotel theme' to aid familiarity.

The Lobby > Welcome page

The Reception > Check-in >, (Resources Library > Case Study, Task Briefs, Briefing Notes), Diary Room > Discussion Forums.

The Café > Discussion Forum

The Main Conference Room > Discussion Forum

The Syndicate Rooms > Discussion Forums

The design sought to reduce the number of 'click throughs' to the main areas whilst grouping key information together. Generally, the students found the structure relatively easy to navigate. "It was a fairly good experience. I felt that many other students did not get as involved as the tutors had hoped/expected. I don't think this was a fault in the design and structure of the case study though. Maybe it was because it was a voluntary activity so, although people had signed up with good intentions, other things got in the way." (rmh21) "The overall design and structure is just right" (stml1) "The spirit of the design and structure were overall noble and extremely well conceived" (dol1).

Due to the set up of the case study within an existing Blackboard site, there was however a technical requirement to click through one page from the main menu to get to the discussion forums, this issue was raised by one student "click too many times to enter the forums" (tyaw2). The case study and resource materials used were also well received with the hotel context being familiar to the students: "The case study was interesting. It was a good choice of subject matter - most people have some idea about an international hotel chain so the subject was more accessible than, say, a manufacturing company" (rmh21).

Whilst the case study and two dimensional structure worked reasonably well, the structure was not assisted by the pace of the case study. The delays at the start of the case study meant that many students logged on to view the case study but found that it had not progressed from when they last logged on, one student wrote: "Interaction is a bit sporadic, and seems slow. There were too many places to visit (main room, briefing room, chat room, etc) and access was slow, so I tend to visit the

main and briefing rooms only" (msh16). This frustration with the lack of pace was echoed by rmh21 "I did think it all went too slowly - several days could go by without any changes to the Blackboard until it got to the point where there didn't seem any point checking it. I was also sorry that it didn't keep up the planned timescale because I'd hoped to use it as a revision exercise for the Year 2 exams at the beginning of April but it hadn't really progressed much at that point. After the exam was over, I rather lost impetus to be involved".

At the time of the case study Blackboard did not offer a mechanism for monitoring the discussion board via an email account. The requirement to log on to see whether there had been any change became frustrating, one student wrote: "… an alert should be sent to an alternate email address for the participants to keep in pace with the case study. For e.g. many a times I fell back on the tempo due to business travel and it was an awesome task to know what I had missed or what was going on.."

When asked for their reflections on how well the main forum and syndicate groups operated, the low participation and the fluctuating tempo of the case study caused concern. Whilst the tasks were generally viewed positively, in terms of the requirements and the time demanded to complete the task, the students experienced difficulty in generating dialogue to address the tasks and to assemble the thinking to provide a response to the task as a group "I enjoyed the initial social interaction. As for the Open Forum it failed to achieve its objectives as (1) a few dominated discussions (2) many others receded into shells" (dol1).

When working within the syndicate groups, students did not feel sufficient proximity to others to enable effective small group working. "Had the groups really met and get down to completing the tasks, providing the feedback and the required suggestions as directed from the onset, it would have been a success." (kp105). Those students who did participate in the case study may also have acted as a barrier for the involvement of others: "It was a shame that all those who signed up to the case study didn't contribute. I wonder whether they may have been intimidated by those who jumped in early with quite long and considered responses. Maybe in future there should be a maximum word limit for initial contributions" (rmh21). Students who took part in the case study were also at different stages of the programme which one student saw as a potential barrier to discussions "The initial briefs were quite comprehensive. However, considering the wide array of students at different levels of study, the assignment briefs were inadequate especially where they were introducing new concepts to new students." (dol1).

The lack of participation from many of those who signed up was acknowledged by those who completed the questionnaire. "Contributions from most group members were lacking, but the few who contributed made some useful observations." (wc21). There were a range of explanations offered for the lack of involvement. Most of these explanations were focused around the team, communication and roles. One student felt that the team could not develop because the process was "A bit impersonal - not easy to find out what to call everyone" (msh16). This impersonalisation was exacerbated because the channels of communications were legislated by the University, restricting informal discourse "General socialisation was great but the ability to network was restricted and yet this is one area students would have really benefited." (dol1).

The difficulty of socialising meant that team roles were not sufficiently developed to facilitate the tasks, "Team work was good but unfortunately the groups had no structure and therefore no roles. No leader, no integrator. No accountabilities." (dol1). Criticism was also levelled at the Tutors and the pacing of the study "At first everyone seemed really keen to introduce themselves and make contact but the energy behind this was lost somewhere along the way. I wonder whether this was because the case study was slow to start" (rmh21) Several students felt that the Tutors should have been more active in the moderation and blamed them for the irregular pace of the study, "There was a lot of effort put by students. The various comments expressed a strong desire to unlock and learn and win as well as enjoy. However, there was a lot of frustration with the pace of the study, the long silences, and the delays. The initial high momentum was lost sadly because of the part the tutors played." (dol1).

Several students felt that the Tutors should have taken a more active role in moderation, "I think they were unsure about how much to intervene! I'm sure this is a very difficult task, as they would not want to dominate the discussion but at the same time, some intervention and direction was necessary. On the whole, I think they could have been a bit more involved if only to keep the discussion boards changing so that I, in my isolation, knew that someone was taking an interest. There were times, when nothing had happened for several weeks, when I thought the whole project might have been abandoned" (rmh21). "The online tutors were initially exceptionally robust and charged. Then they went quiet. Then they attempted to resuscitate the program but it was the students turn to go quiet. As discussed earlier they also failed to provide direction and guidance to the extent that the students would have come out the better." (dol1). There was however praise for the Tutors, with several students perceiving that the Tutors performed a good job in keeping discussions going.

Students & Technology

The questionnaire incorporated several questions on the student's prior experience of virtual learning environments and their online access. Whilst many students had demonstrated considerable experience of the University of Leicester Blackboard, only four acknowledged or referred to this experience in the questionnaire. 10 of the 11 surveyed claimed to log on to Blackboard on a weekly or more frequent basis. All of those surveyed were able to log on to the internet through a broadband internet connection, all via laptops. Two heavy users of Blackboard claimed that they had "no experience" of online learning environments. One student claimed that they "had a lot of experience" of online learning environments and that this experience was amassed through the in-company training systems which were run online.

Unsolicited comments on Blackboard were received, and whilst generally positive on the ability to interact with Tutors "Discussion boards are very useful - quick way of interacting with students and tutors." (msh16), there is a critique of the organisation of the current Blackboard arrangement. One student perceived Blackboard to be "disorganised, as ULMC distance students of different intakes join the same Blackboard VLE." (wc21), a second student (sd131) had experience of a VLE at the University of Berkeley and noted that the "classrooms and the discussion boards were very well defined and linked together. It had a discussion board as well that allowed for interaction with tutor with regards to any points in the classrooms. Most of the classrooms were online and we had some weightage in grades for the attendance and participation online. Additionally many tasks /

assignments where given for discussion online." The quantity of information on Blackboard was also highlighted, with kp105 musing "am still getting a grasp of it. Only realized today that I do have a mail address while experimenting with blackboard. Maybe it needs to be a bit more user friendly or students are told upfront what tools are available to them.".

Whilst these comments may not be representative, they do illustrate that student's individual experience of virtual learning environments influence their perception of their current VLE. The integration of the VLE into assessment and support is significant, as is the need for user friendliness and personalisation.

Problems encountered and lessons learned (Please state any problems that have delayed or otherwise hindered project development and any lessons learned that could inform similar projects.)

Problems Encountered	Lessons Learned
Late student registrations.	Continue with the published schedule regardless and chase up the laggards independently.
Student drop out.	Keep to the schedule. Provide a detailed schedule of when work will be available and when work needs to be submitted by. Some of the task detail, briefing materials and task allocation had been developed as the case progressed in line with an informal judgment about student abilities and interests in an emergent /learning approach
Non-completion of surveys.	This problem is more related to the student drop out than the survey instrument.
Non-attendance.	The activity needs to be assessed and the assessment needs to lead to credits.
Individual student domination of discussion forums.	The Tutors managed this quite well, however the case study project was unfortunate in that it attracted several students where dominant personalities and/or cultural norms proved problematic.

Blackboard course data limitations	There are several issues here. The first relates to the number of students on the Board with consequences on the data manipulation necessary for Blackboard. The second issue relates to the accuracy of the data generated by Blackboard.

3. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

Dissemination:

•A copy of the report will be presented to the Chair of the School of Management Learning & Teaching Committee

•Posting of the report on the ULSM Blackboard staff site

•A paper to be used for conferences and developed for publication

The online case study project was designed to explore the issues surrounding a more learning focused virtual learning environment with the increasing desire for more synchronised use of online resources for distance learning. To this end, much was learnt from the case study. In particular, insight was gleaned on the role and behaviour of the Tutor, the centrality of the socialisation process and the means of managing student expectations across time zones and differential progress in the MBA programme. Whilst a case study of such scale would probably not be attempted in future in a collaborative online environment, the lessons learnt from the experience are being used to develop the student materials for the converged MBA and MSc programmes.

The next stage in the development of Blackboard for the School of Management distance learning support is the move to a modular system with e-tivities. These e-tivities will be based on a framework similar to the tasks used for the online case study. The case study will remain visible to the Tutors so that lessons on managing time and tasks can be reviewed.

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