

**Consider different ways of encouraging students to return to the VLE at regular intervals.** This may be through news forums and activities such as the phased release of new resources or updates about your institution.

**Undertake briefing sessions to introduce students to the VLE.**

Students will need to be provided with guidance on aspects such as access, navigation and expected levels of participation.

**DON'T FORGET**

**Think about how easy Internet access will be for your students.** Remember that not all students will have access at their place of work, and those with access will often have restrictions placed upon them. It is a good idea to involve employers to overcome this problem.

**REFERENCES AND RESOURCES**

Blackboard See <http://www.blackboard.com/>

Blackwell, A Bowes, L Harvey, L Hesketh, A J and Knight, P T (2001) Transforming Work Experience in Higher Education. British Educational Research Journal, 27(3), pp.269-285.

Gray, D (2001). A Briefing on Work-based Learning. LTSN Generic Assessment Series No 11, York: Learning and Teaching Support Network.

Guile, D & Griffiths, T (2001) Learning through Work Experience, Journal of Education and Work, 14(1), pp.113-131.

McConnell, D (2000) Implementing Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (second edition). London: Kogan Page.

O'Leary, R (2002) Virtual Learning Environments, LTSN Generic Centre/ALT guides See <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp>

Quality Assurance Agency (2001) Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: placement learning. See <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/COPplacementFinal/precepts.htm>

Queen Margaret University College Placement Learning Web-site. See <http://www.qmuc.ac.uk/placementlearning/Index.htm>

Salmon, G (2000) E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online London: Kogan Page. See <http://sstweb.open.ac.uk:8282/oubs/gilly/e-moderating/> for extracts

Salmon, G (2002) E-tivities : The Key to Teaching and Learning Online London: Kogan Page. See <http://www.e-tivities.com/home.asp> for extracts

WebCT See <http://webct.com>

Although research has shown that most students are comfortable about using CMC, **students may be apprehensive** about sharing their experiences and reflections openly in an online conference. To get students used to this form of interaction provide opportunities for online discussions to take place prior to the work experience.

**Students may be motivated to use the VLE but may be put off by having to pay for access and/or not having enough time when working.** Think carefully about these issues before deciding on what you expect from students.

Remember when using CMC, **you will also be required to contribute.** Be aware of additional workload demands and make allowances for these. Try to ring-fence time when you are the virtual tutor.

# ONLINE SUPPORT FOR PLACEMENT LEARNING IN HOSPITALITY & TOURISM

## STUART MCGUGAN AND SUSI PEACOCK

This guide provides an introduction to the possible role of online support for placement learning in the subject area of hospitality and tourism. Applications of using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC) will be illustrated. Also tips for placement tutors on getting started are provided including some pointers on areas to address. Details of where to find further resources on this topic are also included.

## PLACEMENT LEARNING

The QAA (2001,p.4) defines placement learning as 'a planned period of learning, normally outside the institution at which the student is enrolled, where the learning outcomes are an intended part of the programme of study'. This type of experience offers the educator an important way to contextualise the learning of the student through reference to industry. Transforming work experience into meaningful learning outcomes and maximising student satisfaction from the placement component of their programme represents an important goal for educators. While this will depend on many factors (placement planning, student expectations, nature of the work etc.), it is the role of placement supervision that is of interest here. Typically placement supervision involves a visit or visits from the student's university or college. While this face to face contact offers many benefits (for student, employer and institution), it is a relatively costly exercise and may not always be practicable or effective. Within this context, web-based technologies provide an additional set of tools that can be used before, during and after a period of placement learning.

## HOW CAN A VLE SUPPORT PLACEMENT LEARNING?

A VLE can be thought of as an integrated web-based toolkit that can facilitate the provision and integration of online teaching tools (O'Leary 2002). While the tools will vary according to the software being used (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard) the facilities normally available include

electronic communication, links to learning resources, online assessment and course administration features. Some potential applications of these tools to support placement learning are now described:

## INFORMATION REPOSITORY

A VLE can provide a convenient repository for all types of placement documentation. Examples may include module

descriptors, assessment briefs, reading lists and other support documentation. This can be useful for students who often lose essential materials during their placements.



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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ'S)

Staff involved in the supervision of placements are likely to experience regular and routine questions from students about their placement (e.g. what do I do if I have a problem or what do I need to work in the USA?). These types of questions (with corresponding answers) can readily be compiled into a FAQ section on a VLE. These may be generated over a number of years by staff.

## THE SHARING OF EXPERIENCES

During their placements students will be exposed to rich variety of workplace experiences. The capturing and sharing of these experiences via a VLE can provide an excellent resource that can be used to transfer knowledge between different year groups of students. To provide a more visual format short video clips of students talking about their placement experiences can be used.

## LINKS TO REMOTE RESOURCES

Access to remote resources such as library services and e-journals is a commonly used application of a VLE. In

## HOW CAN CMC SUPPORT PLACEMENT LEARNING?

This form of interaction allows for communal interaction amongst students and between students and tutors. McConnell (2000, p.34) describes the process as one in which 'messages are entered on to a communal message space and users can attach new messages or responses to existing ones in a way that allows a conversation to develop'. The asynchronous nature of this form of interaction allows for more flexibility as to where and when participants can contribute. Participants can fit their contributions around other commitments such as work and limitless group interaction can carry on over a long period of time. Four potential applications of CMC to support placement learning are described right:

addition links to web-sites, such as those of employers can be incorporated into the VLE. This can be used to facilitate the creation of an employers' database and help students with the planning of their placement.

## CALENDAR

A schedule of key dates such as placement supervisors' visits and interim reporting details can be incorporated into a VLE though an electronic diary. This may be used to develop time management skills and to maintain student socialisation, for example through the sharing of birthdays.

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN STUDENTS AND TUTORS

Typically there will be geographic separation between the students and their college or university during a work placement. Links can be maintained through using email, conferencing and chat room facilities that support various forms of communication: synchronous and asynchronous, one-to-one, one-to-many and many to many. Of particular value is the application of asynchronous computer mediated conferencing.

## PROMOTES REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCE

Blackwell et al (2001,p.283) make the point that tutors should not assume that students have the capacity to abstract learning from their experience (reflection). Mechanisms need to be in place that can facilitate reflection in a constructive way through the involvement of others (students, tutors and employers). Asynchronous online discussion has the potential to provide such a mechanism with participants revisiting and reflecting on topics of conversations after more thought and reading.

## THE CREATION OF A DYNAMIC LEARNING RESOURCE

CMC by its very nature records talk as it happens. The text-based nature of this narrative has the potential to provide a permanent record of experiences as they occur in the workplace that can facilitate knowledge construction with both learner and tutor referring back to this narrative at a future date.

## GETTING STARTED

If you are new to this area you may wish to consider the following practical tips to help you get started:

**Have a clear idea about what you want to achieve from your VLE.** If you plan to use your VLE as an additional tool to support rather than replace existing practice, then start with a small 'adding value' activity. This could be just making existing documents available online or developing some links to employer web-sites.

**Start with informal discussion** if you

## FACILITATES CO-OPERATION IN LEARNING

CMC has considerable potential to facilitate co-operation in learning. At a formal level this may involve participants working together on some common task through the sharing of information and ideas. At an informal level this may involve participants engaging in 'social chat' which can provide a useful form of emotional support during a period of work experience. Students from different years may also support each other prior to going on work experience.

## HELPS TO MONITOR STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Through the use of CMC it is easy for both tutors and learners to monitor their contributions and the contributions of others. This may be useful for a tutor who wishes to examine student performance both in terms of quantity and quality of postings. Moreover students can be encouraged to reflect on their performance and can use their online postings as evidence of this.

plan to use CMC as a way of communicating with students. This will help both you and your students to get comfortable with this form of group interaction. Build on this online socialisation by asking students to share anecdotes of their experiences and remember to respond to these (See Salmon 2000).

**Think about when your VLE can be used to support your students.** Remember that this can be prior, during or on return from the period of work experience.