Chapter VIII

Drivers and Barriers to the Uptake of Learning Technologies: Staff Experiences in a Research-Led University

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Abstract

This chapter discusses key findings from three focus group discussions held with practitioners in a higher education institution about their experiences of using learning technologies to support student learning. Focus groups were organised in March 2004 to further explore staff responses to a 2003 campus-wide survey, which gave a general overview of learning technology use among teaching staff. The chapter will examine the key issues that staff raised during the focus group discussions, including the barriers to and implications of introducing and implementing learning technologies into different subject disciplines within a research-led institution. The question of whether or not the use of learning technologies enhances, or has the potential to enhance, the teaching and learning experience is also discussed, as well as the lessons that staff have learnt from this use.
Introduction

Significant social, technological, and economic developments have taken place over the last 20 years that have transformed, and continue to transform, the nature and role of higher education institutions (Robins, 1999; Salmon, 2002). The transition from elite to mass education, changes in the production of knowledge, and developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs) have all had a major impact on staff and students within these institutions, and on their teaching and learning practices.

Learning technologies have an important role to play in realising the Government vision for a higher education system that offers increased “flexibility,” “improved standards,” and the capacity to remove barriers to participation and achievement (DfES, 2003). An increased use of learning technologies in higher education in recent years indicates that technology can make a positive difference to the learning and teaching experience, particularly in the context of increasing student numbers and a diversifying student population (Davies, Ramsay, Lindfield, & Couperthwaite, 2005a; Armitage & O’Leary, 2003). As Littlejohn (2003) suggests, more and more students are entering higher education with different skills, qualifications, expectations, and needs. Coupled with increased student needs, staff in many institutions are required to be research active and aim for international recognition for their research. Although research can be incorporated into, and inform, good teaching practices, it may be an additional pressure on staff diverting time and resources away from teaching needs.

The University of Birmingham is well-established as a world-class university, teaching and undertaking research in all the major disciplines. There are currently more than 2,500 members of teaching staff supporting over 20,000 full-time equivalent students. It is one of the leading research-led universities in the United Kingdom, being rated the fifth most successful university in the UK for research excellence in the latest (2001) UK Research Assessment Exercise. The University of Birmingham is a member of the Russell Group of 19 major research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom, and of Universitas 21, an elite group of top research universities throughout the world. Furthermore, the aim to enhance student learning through the use of learning technologies is an important part of the University of Birmingham’s learning, teaching, and assessment strategy, particularly in relation to student-centred and flexible learning.

As a response to the current context at the University of Birmingham in particular, and across higher education in general, a survey and a series of subsequent focus group discussions were held in 2003-2004 with teaching practitioners at the University of Birmingham to explore their experiences of using learning technologies to support student learning and to inform future practice and strategy.

This chapter will examine findings from focus group discussions conducted in March 2004 to explore staff responses to a campus-wide survey which provided a general overview of learning technology use among teaching staff (Davies & Smith, 2005). It will analyse the key issues that staff raised, including the barriers to, and implications of, introducing and implementing learning technologies into the curriculum. Also discussed are staff views of how the use of technologies for supporting students have enhanced or changed their teaching practices, and the lessons that they have learnt from their experiences. The analysis builds upon prior studies into staff use of learning technolo-