

Learning and Leading at a Distance

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Abstract

NHS Managers in Scotland on a Post Graduate blended learning programme in Leadership may choose to study an optional module on **Leading Virtual Teams** which was developed at the request of their employers to address the dispersed nature of many healthcare teams in Scotland.

This module is taught entirely online using a range of Web 2.0 tools to give a direct experience of technology-mediated communication and the use of these tools for collaboration. Assessment options include a patchwork format in which they present a Web 2.0 networking site or other collaborative tool they have set up for their own team.

This workshop will present case studies of students' experiences and some of the outcomes from this module, focusing on the transferable skills in Web 2.0 /technology-mediated communication and gained by these students.

It will also look at the online induction programme preparing students for e-learning which was developed to improve student retention, develop e-learning (indeed, lifelong learning) skills and to facilitate peer support.

The workshop will include the opportunity to explore some of the tools introduced on the programme

Introduction and Background

The **Frontline Leadership and Management Programme** was developed in 2007 for NHS Education for Scotland (NES). The programme is delivered through **a blend of online learning**, using Blackboard, and **face to face workshops** for the first three modules. For the final module, which is delivered entirely online, students choose one of three options.

In its first year the programme suffered a high level of student drop out which can be attributed to three main factors: firstly- the lack of preparation of students for the method of delivery; secondly- the lack of preparation of tutors in this form of delivery and thirdly- the lack of appropriate support and training for students in using Blackboard and electronic library facilities.¹

All are "mature" students, studying part time alongside their demanding clinical and managerial jobs.

Online Induction

In the second year of running the programme, a two week induction to the programme as a whole was introduced, delivered via Blackboard, which familiarises students with social networking, accessing e-journals, using the online library and using the Discussion Boards. Retention and student engagement (Blackboard Discussion participation) in Year 2 has shown an improvement as a result.

¹ See appendix 2 Fig 1 for figures on student retention

Students complete a self assessment and personal reflection at the end of the induction module and in general tend to report that they feel more confident with the technology as a direct result of having undertaken it.²

A survey conducted with a small sample of students completing the programme³ confirmed that the Induction Programme had been especially helpful in supporting them to access Blackboard, use the Discussion Boards, find their way around Athens and download electronic journal articles.

Optional Module using Web 2.0 tools

Leading and Managing at a Distance is one of the three options offered in the final module. Its focus is the leadership of dispersed or virtual teams. This module was specifically requested by NES as so many health services in Scotland are managed remotely across very large areas⁴

One of the main features of this module is its use of web 2.0 or internet based tools to facilitate communication between team members. In order to demonstrate the value of such tools, the module itself makes use video and audio recordings, hosted on YouTube, to introduce the tutors and the module, and to explain how to use the Wimba classroom. We also use Survey Monkey, Doodle, Slideshare, blogs, wikis and Ning as means of disseminating information and creating a sense of community, in addition to the Discussion Board in Blackboard.

Students enrolling for the LAMD module in this second year were appreciably more comfortable with social networking tools in general and less reluctant to join in discussions and virtual classroom activities than their counterparts last year. Results from an end of module survey indicate that the induction programme (as discussed above) did much to prepare students for e-learning and equip them with the skills necessary to complete the programme as a whole and to meet the challenges of this option in particular.

Social networking media used in Optional Module

Twitter: students were invited to follow the tutor on Twitter. This was not taken up universally though two of the students do now clearly use this regularly with one another and with other colleagues. NHS Firewalls block access to Twitter⁵ so it cannot be used for work purposes or at least not within work time.

On line activities include contribution to discussion board topics (only actually used for introductions and technical questions in this module), attending a virtual classroom using

Wimba and reading and commenting on the Module **blog**

<http://thevirtualleader.blogspot.com>

² See appendix 2 for quotations

³ See figure 2

⁴ One student recently described her Health Board as covering an area the size of Belgium!

⁵ <http://4glengate.net/node/448> No tweets please, we're British health workers

A small number of students took up the challenge of responding to the tutor's blog postings with comments. Some of last year's students still follow the blog and one or two from this years' cohort are also still reading and commenting from time to time.

Wiki - in the first year of running the module, it was thought that a wiki would be the most accessible and easiest type of platform for students to use in their final presentations, and a wiki was used as the basis of some group tasks which the participants were required to complete. Two students *had* subsequently taken up the option of presenting their final assessments in relation to wiki sites they had developed with and for their own work teams.

However, during the module, students experienced some difficulties in using the wiki for group tasks. The first wiki task - which required students to develop a research proposal involving storytelling in organisations, proved too complex. Whether it was the subject of the activity (not all had experience of developing research proposals and no one had used storytelling techniques previously) combined with the novelty of the form and the requirement for collaboration, but no one was willing to start. Savin-Baden and Gibbon (2006) caution that

"The combined use of interactive media and problem based learning is complicated, since, on their own, problem-based learning and interactive media each demand that staff and students possess a complex array of different teaching and learning capabilities" (p126)

Ning:- In Year Two, rather than impose any particular platform, an online teaching session was hosted on Wimba classroom to introduce a variety of social networking media in which I introduced students to Twitter, Ning, Blogger and Netvibes amongst others. Following this session, three students started to use Twitter, one investigated Netvibes and all requested that a Ning Community be set up for them so that they could explore it and consider using it for their own projects.

In one of the on-line seminars the group discussed the fact that people will access technology and use it if they have a genuine need to do so and it feels like a meaningful activity.⁶ As an example – students on this module have persevered in accessing the Wimba classroom despite technological problems (signal strength, Broadband-provider faults etc) as they found the sessions useful and because there is no face to face element built into the module. The blog also provided a place for comment and discussion and provided additional reading and links to on line resources. Two students in Year Two experimented with different platforms to create social and learning networks for their own teams – one chose Wetpaint wiki and the other Ning.⁷

Scaffolding and introducing students to new communications technology

Just as the online induction module to the programme as a whole takes students through a series of tasks increasing in complexity in order to become familiar with e-learning, so the **Leading and Managing at a Distance Module** made use of scaffolding techniques to familiarise students with Web 2.0 tools and the Wimba classroom in particular.

⁶ <http://adventuresincareerdevelopment.posterous.com/why-people-dont-use-web-20-thoughts-prompted>

⁷ Appendix 1 contains brief case studies featuring some of the students and their projects

	Access	Socialisation	Information sharing	Knowledge construction	Development
Bb	"How to" videos; PPT	Introduce yourself: Discussion Board	Learning Materials & Technical queries	-	-
Blog	"How to" videos	Introduce tutor	Learning Resources; links	Student contributions	Student project
Wimba classroom	Netiquette; polls; practice	Chat;	Progress with projects	Student led sessions	Introduced free versions for own projects....
Wiki	Text on home screen	Profiles and pictures	Discussion Boards	Group activities	Student project
Ning or Groups					Student Project

In this table, I give an indication of how I used various web-based tools (including Blackboard) to structure the students' learning and engagement with the module activities. Of particular importance was the creation of short videos or screencasts to teach students how to use the tools, the structuring of early activities to encourage contribution (setting up tables to be completed on the wiki or a poll in Wimba classroom, for example); using Discussion Boards on Blackboard and profile pages on the wiki to get students to introduce themselves.

New Patchwork Assessment format

Curle et al (2006) make an interesting observation about assessment in relation to health service personnel:

"Using traditional assessments drives students to focus on the transmission of propositional knowledge (Gibbs and Simpson 2202) whereas they need to apply deep learning to their work with people. As Grant (200) indicates, transmission models emphasise academic content and show little evidence of transfer into practice. They are also of dubious utility for assessing competence in health service settings characterised by uncertainty, complexity and an ever-expanding knowledge base." (p180)

Trying to make the module and its assessment relevant – and the learned skills and knowledge transferable - to working practice was a key challenge. In particular it was deemed essential to align the assessment with the module topic and to incorporate the use of web 2.0 tools in the final presentation.

The main purpose in using a patchwork assessment model was to reward students for active collaboration in on line activities which they subsequently reflect upon and learn from and to engage them in the process of constructing a finished project which was of real practical use to them in their work.

Richard Winter neatly summarises the key dimensions of the patchwork format:

The unity of the Patchwork Text has two dimensions. To begin with it is defined by academic staff, as they carefully derive a sequence of tasks from the course material. And finally it is, as it were, re-defined by individual students, who review (and perhaps edit) their separate pieces of work in order to write their final section as an interpretation of what this course material 'means', to them, now (see Scoggins and Winter, 1999). In this way, one might argue, the Patchwork Text seeks to integrate the different (and apparently opposed) assessment advantages of the essay (unified structure) and the portfolio (individual reflection). Winter (2003 p119)

In the virtual Teams module, the four main elements consisted of:

1. A reading journal containing a minimum of 5 article/book reviews with critical analysis of the main arguments and models proposed. This would meet the criteria requiring critique of models and theories.
2. A wiki, blog, website, PowerPoint presentation, podcast (as examples) dealing with a topic/addressing a need identified in the broad area of communication in a virtual or dispersed team. This would meet the criteria for evidencing the use of technology to enhance collaborative working.
3. A critical reflective summary of personal learning including the experience of working as a member of a dispersed team; issues in technology mediated communication; issues of leadership etc.
4. Completed self and peer assessments of the web-based presentation

Assessment Criteria

The original criteria had been based on a wiki or website. During individual tutorials, it became clear that some students were already developing videos and podcasts as teaching aids or using online documents for collaboration. Assessment criteria were therefore developed which could be adapted to a variety of media for the presentation of their projects.

A specific Wimba classroom session was run in which the criteria and marking scheme were posted on a Powerpoint presentation and feedback sought. Further drafts were then posted on Blackboard and finally issued as the definitive criteria/ mark sheets once students had had the opportunity to comment.

A matrix approach to the assessment of the patchwork was adopted to ensure coverage of the key criteria.

Criteria	Site/Tool 30%	Reflection 30%	Journal 40%
Words	1000-2000	500 -1000	750 - 1500
Presentation /10	☆	☆	☆
Reflection /20		☆	
Content /20			☆
Application /20	☆	☆	
Critical Analysis /30			☆

The website/online presentation aspect of the patchwork assignment was to be self and peer assessed (as well as tutor assessed) according to the following criteria.

Web based Presentation: Mark scheme and assessment criteria			
Mark /20	Application of theory to practice	Mark /10	Presentation
14-20	Is able to apply theories/models and new knowledge to provide a creative and original solution to a workplace problem. Has created a web-based site, tool or presentation that is demonstrably fit for purpose, attractive and engaging, meeting the needs of users.	7-10	Overall presentation, layout, grammar, organisation all excellent; excellent structure. Has answered the assignment brief in depth. Appropriate and interesting language. Excellent use of graphics, interesting or original design and highly intuitive navigation between sections.
12-13	Is able to apply theories/models and new knowledge creatively to solve a workplace problem. Has created a web-based site, tool or presentation that is fit for purpose, attractive and engaging, meeting the needs of users.	6	Overall presentation, layout, grammar, organisation all done to a very good standard. Clear structure. Appropriate and interesting language. Has clearly answered the assignment brief. Good use of graphics, well designed and simple navigation.
10-11	Has been able to apply some new knowledge to solve a workplace problem. Has created a web-based site, tool or presentation that is fit for purpose and attractive and has the potential to meet the needs of most of its users.	5	Overall presentation, layout, grammar, structure, organisation are good. Has answered the assignment brief. Design and visuals are appropriate and site navigation is explained and signposted well.
8-9	Has been able to apply some new knowledge to address a workplace problem. Has created a web-based site, tool or presentation that is fit for purpose.	4	Overall presentation, layout, grammar, structure, organisation are adequate. Some aspects of the assignment brief not covered. Design, visuals and navigation are adequate to the purpose.
PASS			
6-7	Has been able to apply some new knowledge to create a functional web-based site, tool or presentation but not clearly linked to an existing workplace issue. Unclear if this will meet the needs of its intended audience.	3	Overall presentation, layout, grammar, structure, organisation inadequate. Some aspects of the assignment brief not covered. Design, visuals and navigation are not adequate to the purpose.
4-5	Has created a functional web-based site, tool or presentation but this is not clearly linked to an existing workplace issue and is not sufficiently developed. Does not meet the needs of its intended audience.	2	Many aspects of presentation, layout, grammar, organisation, design are poor. Lacks a coherent structure. Assignment brief not adequately covered.
0-3	Poorly constructed, does not function as intended. Does not meet the needs of its intended audience.	0/1	Poorly presented and not related to the assignment brief.

Conclusion: Some reflections on the module outcomes

At the end of the module in Year Two, students were asked to complete an on line survey about their experiences during - and learning from - both the option module and the induction programme⁸

It was clear from this that the on line induction programme had proved beneficial in encouraging students to tackle e-learning technology and had supported them through their studies. The Virtual Teams optional module had further provided an introduction to and experience of Web 2.0 tools which they had never before encountered and which they were tentatively exploring in their work as means of communication and collaboration. Whilst for many the firewalls present in the NHS made access to some social networking sites impossible, the experience had nonetheless awakened in them a desire to add such tools to their virtual leadership repertoire and all were actively seeking ways of incorporating tools into intranets with the support of their IT departments or of using NHS equivalents such as the e-library community space, shared drives, etc.

Students presenting their assignments using the patchwork format found it difficult to fit elements of their project into one component or another – it is now clearer what tasks students need to undertake and how they can be best advised to structure the patchwork. Students also found keeping to word counts difficult as they struggled to make decisions about where and how to tackle various elements.

On the other hand, by having a distinct section on personal reflections of the module, it was found that coverage of this criterion vastly improved.

The two web 2.0 sites submitted were difficult to assess in terms of presentation and design because little of their own ideas had gone into the final format. The sites they used were based on fixed templates, although one student had made a good attempt to customise this. The PowerPoint presentation that **Clare**⁹ produced was actually more effective as it told the story of her project very clearly.

There was general approval for the use of the Wimba classroom despite what had seemed to be a very disruptive failure of connection or tools at times. The students persevered and reported that it had been both enjoyable and useful as a means of keeping in touch with one another and with their tutor.

Students also clearly valued the fact that learning from the module was directly transferable to the workplace, particularly as the assignment focused on specific projects to address current issues in their own teams.¹⁰

It has to be said that this module is not the most popular and has probably attracted students who were already fairly confident with use of online resources and tools. However, this was not the case with all students and some were attracted purely because of the topic and its relevance to their own teams. As a tutor I have not felt that the lack of face to face teaching is a disadvantage and I have not

⁸ Appendix 3

⁹ See case studies, Appendix 1

¹⁰ See assignment briefs, Appendix 4

felt the amount of support needed for individual students to be particularly onerous, but these have been small groups.

There are funding issues which have enforced the teaching of this final module on-line and some tutors - and students - are still convinced that face to face workshops to support the final module, as in the case of the first three, would be preferable. The rationale for teaching this particular subject matter wholly on line is perhaps stronger, but even the most dispersed of globally-based virtual teams do occasionally meet for face to face discussion, training etc. The use of an online synchronous classroom does however make up for a lot of what is lost by not being able to be physically present in the same space.

Appendix 1

Case Studies: Students' journeys

Lynne leads a group of volunteers undertaking counselling with people going through relationship breakdown. She is keen to encourage them to connect on line using a **Ning Community**, for example, which would give them the opportunity to network, discuss common issues access information in a protected but accessible environment. Lynne is aware of the inhibitions experienced by this group when proposing online communication – many feel they are part of an older generation not used to this form of communication and they are somewhat scared of technology. Lynne's proposal is to meet face to face with her group initially to discuss the on line community and get their reactions. She has sent them some information in preparation but she intends to go into the meeting with an open mind, listen to their suggestions and answer any questions.

Annibale is responsible for the learning and development of a group of young, newly qualified dentists. He has set up a **Ning Community and a wiki** aimed at encouraging "learning conversations" between them. His group, being from a younger demographic, are already fairly confident social networkers. They have used the wiki for sharing resources and discussing learning topics – as well as arranging a Christmas party.

Margaret is responsible for the training and development of dental nurses. These tend to be once again somewhat sceptical about social networking although technology is in use in classrooms (video conferencing, SMART boards etc). Margaret is however looking to produce some learning material via **podcast** and store this in the e-library community which is accessible to NHS Scotland staff.

Clare is a Paediatric Occupational Therapist. With a widely dispersed team there have been longstanding problems in using multiple systems for recording and sharing important patient information. Care is now persuading staff to use a **common Word Document** housed in a secure file on the shared drive. She has produced a Powerpoint presentation outlining the project.

Gerry manages a team dispersed across 80 miles or so – NHS firewalls have prevented him from accessing social networking media but this has driven him to meet with IT and Telecoms specialists to discuss communications and to gain a better understanding of some of the issues. His chief frustration at the moment is that colleagues signed up to an intranet based **e-learning system** which all agreed would be a useful resource – and then nobody has logged on to make use of it.

Neil works as an Organ Transplant Coordinator and has recently been the driving force behind a **video and CD Rom based training package** to be used in Scottish schools. Coordinating the efforts of colleagues across the UK to produce this has been a perfect example of virtual project management.

Appendix 2

Figure 1: Students withdrawing/deferring places -Year 1 and Year 2 compared

Year	Number started programme (new students)	Number completed in year	Number withdrawn and not returning	Number rejoined subsequent Programmes	Net loss
1	212	113	66*	33	31%
2	153 [†]	95	24	34	16%
3	91 [†]	Completing 2011	Completing 2011	Completing 2011	

*25 of these left **before the end of Module 1** largely citing technical issues/dislike of e-learning

[†] numbers have reduced each year in line with **client's** original plan for funding of this contract

Typical comments from students reflecting on the on-line induction from their reflective assignments submitted prior to the start of the first module:

"I was not familiar with the use of the blackboard facility. This module has increased my knowledge and confidence to use it effectively."

"My real fear of IT at the onset wasn't helpful but I'm really proud that I did eventually manage to overcome some of them. I hope to break them down a piece at a time and gain confidence along the way."

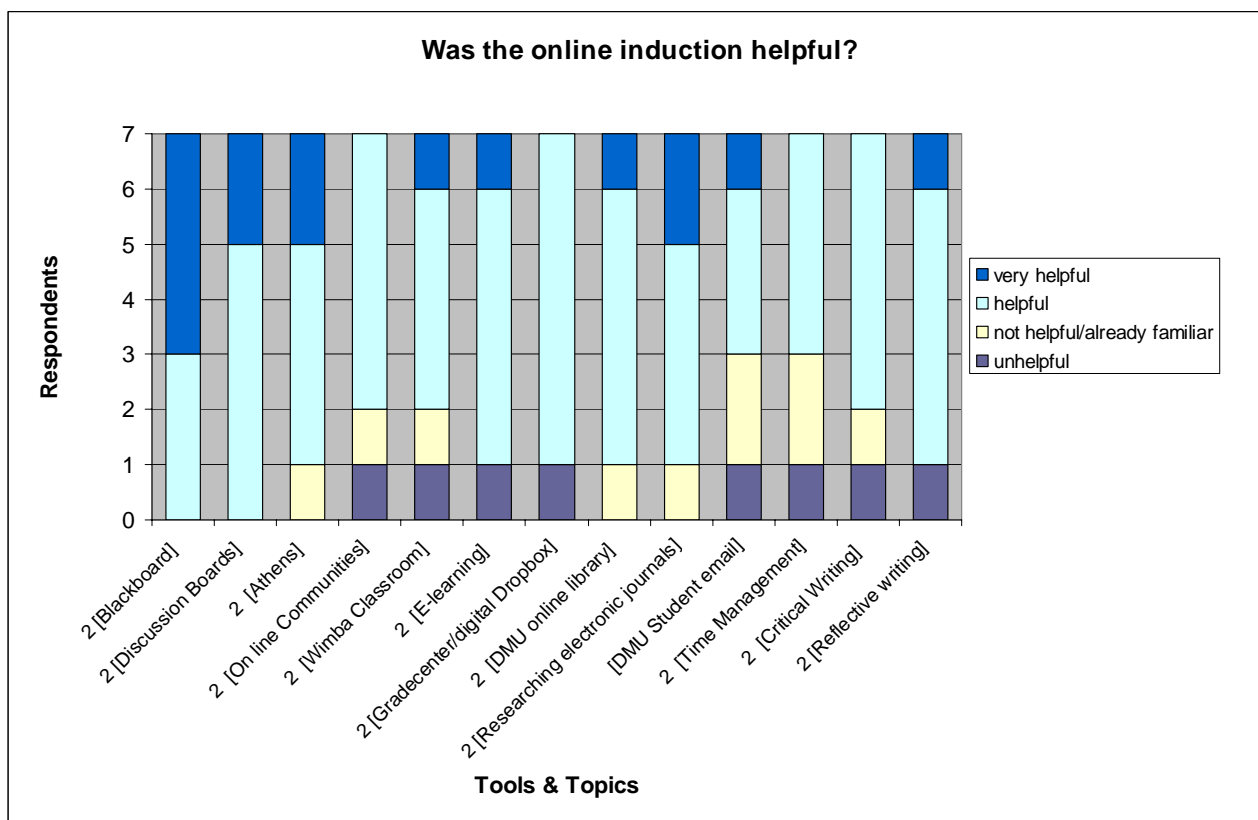
"Although I think I am a fairly computer literate and gregarious person I am new to the e-experience of combining them both and though my wife has encouraged me to join a social networking site I am very new to this genre. I was surprised how difficult and uncomfortable I found this task. Publishing details of myself and my opinions proved more challenging in a written format than the usual verbal banter of group discussions."

"This has been an extremely useful introduction for me. I have never been exposed to anything like blackboard before and it has been really good to navigate my way around it, it has also been good to read about my fellow students!"

A survey, conducted amongst the students who undertook the Virtual Teams option, asked them both about their experience of both the module and of the programme as a whole. The sample who responded was very small – just 7 users – but nonetheless demonstrates a change in familiarity with,

and confidence in using, a variety of e-learning tools. The results are set out in the graphs which follow:

Figure 2 – Helpfulness of the induction programme by category of tool and topic area

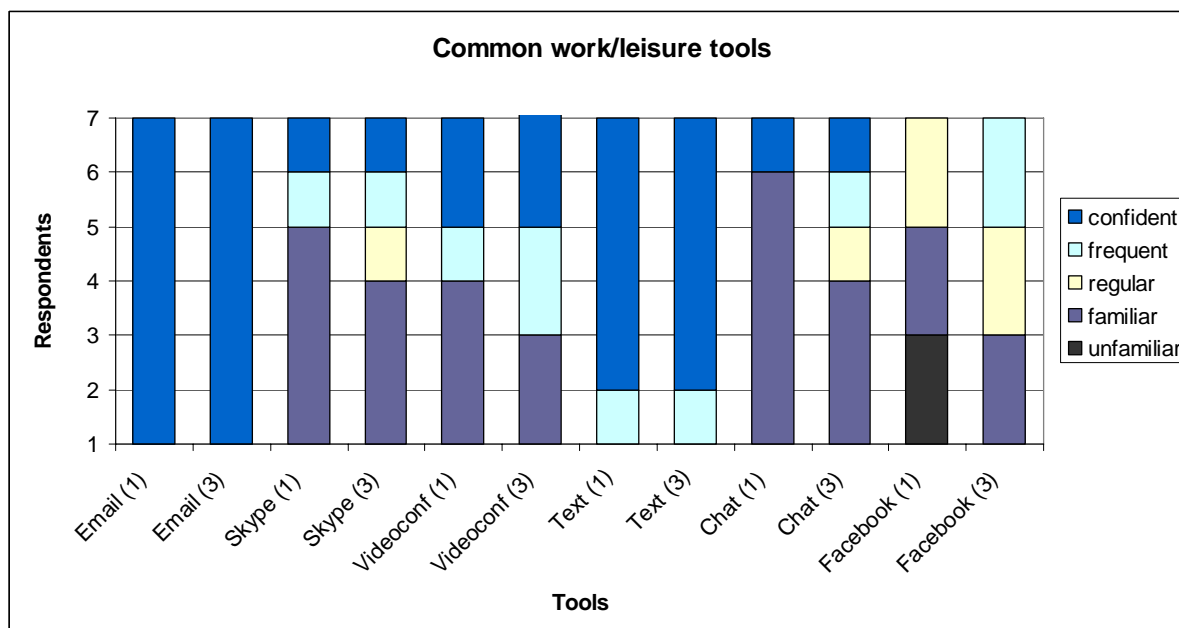


Additional comments:

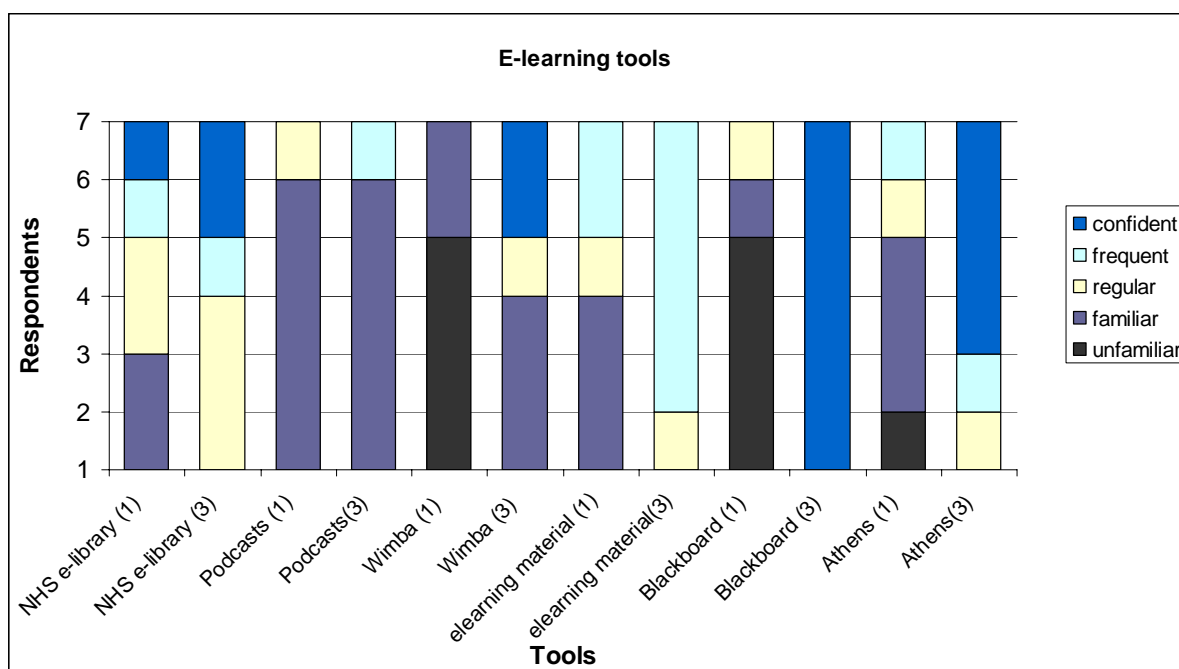
I think more guidance on critical and reflective writing would have been helpful. The pod cast about the management report was a life saver! I listened to this and changed my first assignment after it. Time management was ok, but perhaps something on motivation to learn/read?

I really enjoyed blackboard once I became more confident and having to do the induction module forced me to become familiar!! - this was a challenge but I am glad I did this as it helped a lot.

I was often very frustrated spending hours trying to find articles through Athens and other sources.

Figure 3 Experience of commonly available communication/networking tools

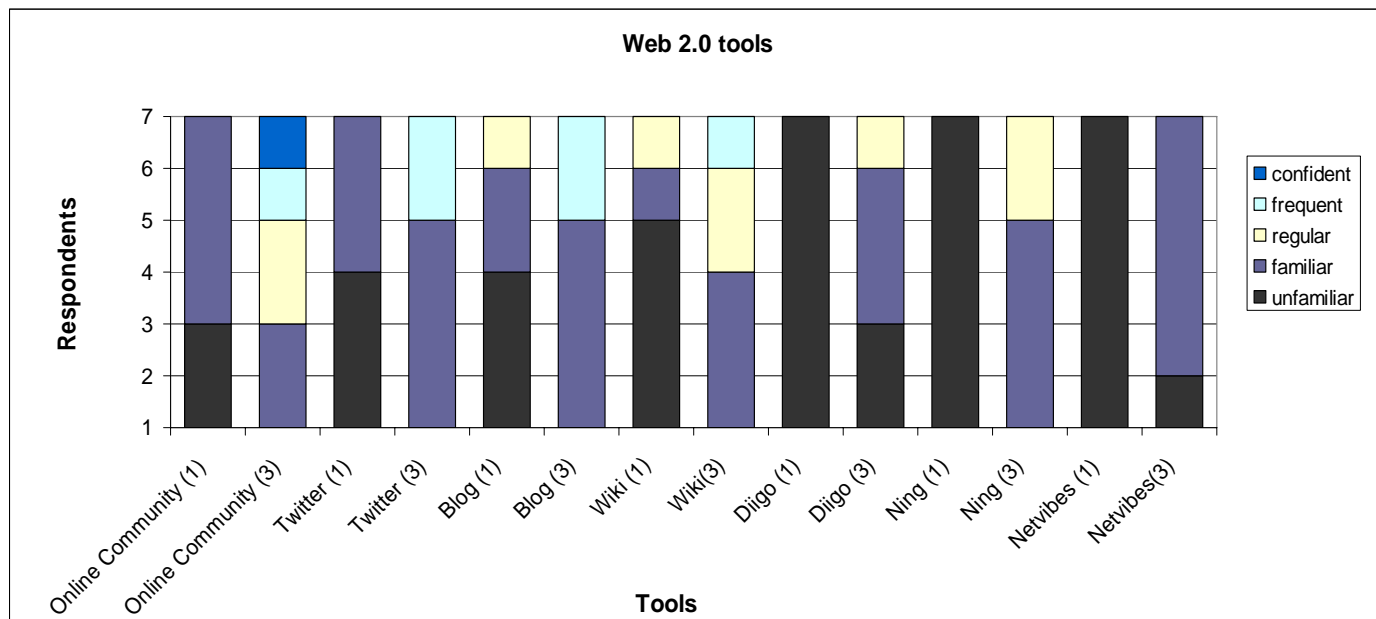
Students were used to using SMS/text, and email but also video conferencing for work. Skype, chat (MSN) and Facebook were also fairly familiar platforms in leisure time – there is little change shown here therefore between familiarity/use of these tools before the start and at the end of the programme ¹¹

Figure 4 Experience of e-learning tools

¹¹ (1) responses = prior to commencing the programme; (3) responses = after completing the Virtual Teams Module

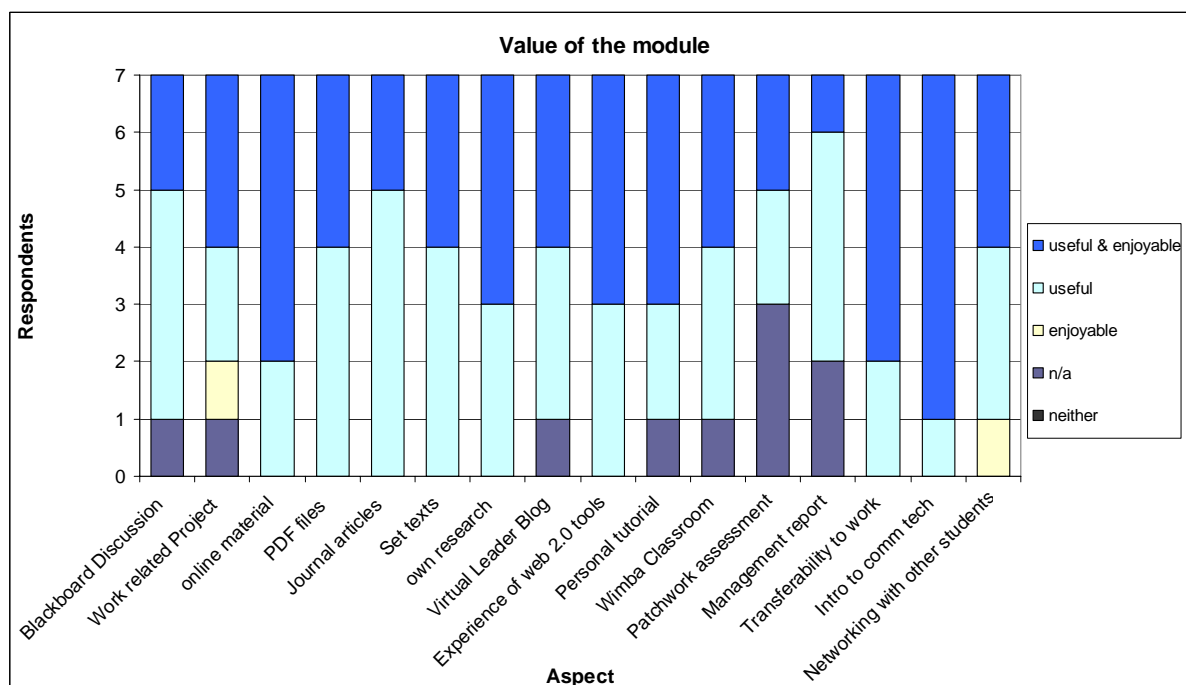
Many also had already had some experience of e-learning - particularly on-line material, the NHS Scotland e-library and podcasts - but less so in using Blackboard, Wimba Classroom and Athens

Figure 4 Experience of Web 2.0 tools



The dark gray areas show just how great was students' ignorance of Web 2.0 tools prior to the programme. This aspect of their learning showed a dramatic change following the Virtual Teams module.

Figure 5 –Students were asked which aspects of the Module had been most enjoyable and/or useful



Transferability of skills/learning to the work situation, introduction to other communications technology and the on-line learning materials were most often cited as **“enjoyable and**
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useful” Others cited were conducting their own research, experience of Web 2.0 tools, and interaction with other students and the personal tutorial.

Additional comments:

The module has developed my knowledge of specific web 2.0 tools

Learned about Huddles and Prezi and recently Google wave.

I could only use most of these tools out-with the NHS.net, so it would only be when at home that I would have a go with them

I feel that the module encompassed all of the learning outcomes set out at the beginning.

The blackboard discussion did not take off as in the other 3 modules. I appreciate that in the weekly lesson exercises there were activities which encouraged us to post views on Blackboard but as this has not happened then maybe you could use a Ning or wiki as the means for group discussions. More colourful and sociable than a blackboard discussion board!

Overall it has been a great module and for me a quick and steep learning curve with the new technology and also brought together thought processes learned from the first three modules.

I have found all modules challenging but excellent and this has had a direct impact on my skills within the workplace!!

I found this module very interesting, very relevant and very useful. I would not be surprised if LAMD became a core competence for most managers and leaders in the very near future

Figure 6: reasons students cited for enjoying Wimba/finding it useful

5. If you found Wimba classroom useful and/or enjoyable , why was this? *

please select all which apply

- ☒ 7 It provided a way of connecting with fellow students
- ☒ 5 It provided a way of connecting with my tutor
- ☒ 4 It allowed me to experience a different way of communicating
- ☒ 4 It has made me consider the potential use of similar tools with my own work
- ☒ 4 The session content provided me with an understanding of what was required in the assignment
- ☒ 5 The session content gave me an insight into other students' work and how they were approaching the assignment
- ☒ 5 The session content introduced me to different web 2.0 tools that I could use to communicate in my work
- ☒ 5 The session content introduced me to different web 2.0 tools I could use for my personal and professional development

Additional comments:

Unfortunately due to other commitments I was unable to link in with the Wimba sessions.

I found it difficult to organise time to do this. I have a young family and time demands are an issue.

Appendix 4 Assignment Brief and Learning Outcomes

Option 1

Assessment will take the form of a “patchwork” assessment which requires you to submit a collection of shorter pieces of work with **peer and self -assessment**.

- a) You will present a record of your reading - and your responses to that reading - in the form of a journal which includes **a short, critical analysis of five main resources** (set texts, articles or websites) and **reference to** at least five others. This will be assessed on Presentation, Critical Analysis and Content (around **750 -1500 words**) and account for 40% of total marks
- b) You will create, alone or in a group, *a presentation about* – or a web based/digitally-created site or tool designed to *address the issue of* - team communications, development or motivation (formats could include: a blog, wiki, video, podcast, website, on-line portfolio, Powerpoint presentation or social network community site). This will be assessed, **by self, peer and tutor**, on Presentation and Application of Theory to Practice. It will be **equivalent to** 1500-2000 words and account for 30% of total marks.
- c) You will produce a short reflective piece (around **500-1000 words plus a final PDP**) describing your participation in this group exercise and its implications for your future practice. This will be assessed on Presentation, Reflection and Application of Theory to Practice. It will account for 30% of the total marks. Questions to be covered include:
 - i) What has been your experience of this module? Using the Wimba classroom, the web 2.0 social networking tools; interacting with fellow students and tutor, developing your site/tool or presentation, alone or in a group?
 - ii) What have you learned from your study of the course materials and how has this helped you to address issues in your work? Any new learning? What has been confirmed or consolidated from previous study or experience? What didn't work for you?
 - iii) What have you learned from completing the project? What was difficult? Any surprises? Things you would do differently.
 - iv) What have you learned about yourself as a leader of a dispersed team? What further development needs have you identified?
- d) you will complete a self-assessment mark sheet evaluating your web based project
- e) you will seek peer assessment of your web based project and ask peer(s) to complete the relevant mark sheet.

Option Two – for those unable to collaborate on line because of time commitments, internet access issues *or who choose not to because of their personal learning style* – you will as an alternative be able to complete a 3500 word management report as you have in previous modules, exploring an issue of communications and/or motivation within your own team which you would like to address.

Learning Outcomes

LO1 Critically evaluate the different challenges and opportunities facing individuals, teams and projects working at a distance in a context of service reconfiguration

LO2 Describe the needs and characteristics of staff that are managed at a distance and relate this to different motivational models, practices and behaviours. Critically analyse the implications for individual, team and organisational effectiveness.

LO3 Critically assess a range of technologies and their possible application in supporting individuals, teams and projects at a distance to support service reconfiguration.)

LO4 Identify approaches that can support, motivate and encourage staff operating at a distance to deliver service improvement and provide outline performance evaluation criteria to assess their effectiveness

LO5 Critically analyse your own service environment to show how the concepts, methods and tools of this module might be applied to support service improvement

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