



THE NEXT GENERATION VLE

It is as much a fixture of campus life as the library or lecture hall, yet many universities admit that their VLE is underutilised. As VLE technology evolves to incorporate advanced web 2.0 tools, users should prepare to accelerate into the digital future. Natalie Nezhati reports ➤



ABOVE: Dr Demetra Katsifli,
Senior Director of Industry Management
at Blackboard

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has transformed over the last decade and will probably continue to do so over the next. Often as distinctive in character as an institution itself, the VLE is now considered an integral part of the university brand.

"We see our UK customers using the VLE to strengthen students' identity and connection with their course and university," says Demetra Katsifli, Senior Director of Industry Management at Blackboard. "This is as important as using it to improve curriculum learning and teaching."

Picture this: Lara, a second-year student of biological sciences, is on the bus when she receives a VLE notification through Facebook of a 'submission comment alert'. This might take the form of multimedia feedback which Lara can view from her phone. Lara reviews her tutor's comments multiple times before posting an additional question about 'energy processes' to a lively course discussion board. A classmate responds within minutes and Lara screenshots the information to her notes. To consolidate her knowledge of this topic, Lara then completes an interactive quiz.

"Teachers are beginning to move learning activities such as quizzes, assignment submissions and peer reviews from the classroom online," says Kenny Nicholl, Director of Higher Education at Canvas. "Teachers using Canvas can also provide formative and summative assessment and live rich feedback (including



A screenshot of the Blackboard mobile application. At the top, it shows a course titled 'Absorption Process, Ener...' with a blue header bar labeled 'Details & Information'. Below this, course details are listed: 'Biological Sciences: Absorption Process, Energy Concepts - Test 1', 'Due 3/16/2014 9:00 pm', and '1 Attempt Available'. There are sections for 'Required Completion' and 'Timed Test (120 min)'. The 'Instructions' section includes a note: 'Remember, this test follows Chapters 1-3 in your main book, as well as lecture content that is also available online. Good luck!' At the bottom, a button says 'Slide to start attempt'.

Below this, another screen shows a course outline for 'Biological Sciences' with a 'Course Outline' section. It lists a professor named 'Susan Fontana, Professor' with a photo, and a schedule entry for 'Mon, Wed 9:00am - 11:00am' in 'Gulfstream Hall Room 102'. Further down, there are links to 'Biological Sciences: Syllabus' (Posted 3/16/2014 at 2pm), 'Week 1 Reading' (All week 1 required reading is in this folder), 'Mid Term PowerPoint' (New! Posted Today), 'First Quiz' (Score 85% (B) -1 Resubmission), and 'Assignment 4' (Score 87% (B) -1 Resubmission).

ABOVE: Students can complete quizzes from any location using Blackboard's Mobile Learn. Students also share resources using Blackboard Collaborate
LEFT: Kenny Nicholl, Director of Higher Education at Canvas
RIGHT: Student data can be monitored at a glance using Blackboard Analytics for Learn

video), inviting a student to respond and collaborate with them."

But while the VLE can be a powerful tool, its effectiveness is dependent on user engagement. Rather than using it as an electronic repository for course documents – reading lists, assessment schedules and syllabi – the technology is best used to support active learning opportunities. In fact, educators are encouraged to consider the VLE as an abbreviation of 'valuable learning experience' to reinforce its primary purpose.

Developing a valued VLE might seem daunting to staff who say their institution's VLE is 'cumbersome' or 'frustrating to use'. Accordingly, students sometimes report that their learning materials are out of date, poorly labelled and lacking in interactivity.

Though the latest generation of VLE platforms are attractive, intuitive and designed with the user in mind, Jisc research finds that academics will still require support in developing their digital proficiencies.

"Often digital can be treated as a separate strand; something that's not part of the job requirement," says Chris Thompson, a Jisc Subject Specialist for Online Learning and Digital Student Experience. "For me, unlocking the more innovative opportunities in VLEs comes down to capabilities."

Jisc recommend that digital leaders are identified to set and drive the vision of a VLE, helping academic staff to understand the technology and its role within an institution's strategy.

A model of best practice can be found in Sheffield Hallam University, where staff and students have worked in partnership to develop their VLE. Praised by Jisc as 'an extraordinary initiative', the result is a consistent digital experience, widely valued by its users.

Sheffield Hallam's first step was to consult students about their experiences and preferences, which led to the publication of a 'minimum expectations in e-learning' policy. This, together with modelled best practice, staff training and ongoing IT support, has led to a dramatically improved



A screenshot of a Blackboard Collaborate session titled "Astronomy 101". A student named David is sharing a resource from NASA's website. The resource is titled "Image of Pluto's Vast, Icy Plain Informally Called Sputnik Planum". The image shows a close-up of a fractured, icy terrain on Pluto. Below the image is a sidebar with various news articles about Pluto. At the bottom of the screen, there are participant icons and a video feed of another student.

A screenshot of a Blackboard Collaborate session titled "Astronomy 101". A video feed shows a woman in a blue shirt and headphones. Below her are smaller video feeds of three other participants. On the right side of the screen, a list titled "6 Participants" shows five individuals: Marissa Dimino (Moderator), Richard Desiano (Moderator), Justin Boyce (Presenter), David, and Susie Patton. There are also options to "Make moderator", "Make presenter", "Make captioner", and "Remove from session". At the bottom of the screen, there are participant icons and a video feed of another student.

TOP: Students share resources using Blackboard Collaborate. **ABOVE:** Students participate in a web conference

"TARGETING INFORMATION AND SERVICES AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE TO EACH STUDENT'S UNIQUE SITUATION WILL BENEFIT THE STUDENT OVERALL"



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ABOVE: Sarah Sherman, Service Manager at Bloomsbury Learning Environment

student experience in technology-enhanced learning.

Richard Havinga from the University of London Computer Centre (ULCC), recommends in-house ‘swap days’ as a way of showcasing good practice. Part of the University of London, ULCC provides its own Hosted Moodle service, ‘Bloom’, to a number of UK HEIs and provides a fully managed VLE service. “Educators will often learn best from each other,” says Havinga. “It is important to empower staff with the skills that they need.”

Perhaps worth emphasising to tentative staff is that a VLE can save time when assessing work and creating learning content. Using a tool such as Canvas SpeedGrader, tutors can provide all student feedback from one place and easily hide names for blind marking. Reusable content, such as assessment activities and discussion topics, can also be shared with multiple student groups.

As VLE analytics become more sophisticated, universities are increasingly using students’ personal information to provide targeted support, services and monitoring. An undergraduate Chinese student with an interest in table tennis, for instance, might view a VLE service that is quite different from a British MBA student at the same institution.

“There are many factors, both academic and non-academic, that contribute to each student’s success,” says Demetra Katsifli. “Targeting information and services as closely as possible to each student’s unique situation will benefit the student overall.”

Such factors might include socio-economic background, country of origin and attendance records. The result is a personalised VLE experience to support both student wellbeing and academic progress.

“The University of London

International Academy is looking at being able to predict whether a student is at risk of dropping out and might need extra support,” says Sarah Sherman, Service Manager for the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) – a shared e-learning service for a collaboration of six HE institutions in London, who all use ULCC’s hosted Moodle service. “According to research, less than 50% of universities are currently using analytics data. Of course, we also need to ensure whether we’re asking the right questions, otherwise the data is meaningless.”

Analytics tools can also be used to tailor learning to the specific needs of a VLE user based on their particular responses and approaches to tasks given. This process of ‘adaptive learning’ is predicted to become a significant feature of VLE use. The UK is at the forefront of change for VLE-linked assessment tools, such as double blind marking and anti-plagiarism software. Yet providers note a reluctance to abandon face-to-face teaching entirely.

“US colleges seem to be embracing online learning more quickly than their UK counterparts,” observes Kenny Nicholl. “More than 80% of colleges and universities across America offer fully online modules or programmes.”

Some attribute this difference to a greater demand for flexible, online distance learning courses from the US market, probably resulting from higher costs of study.

The UK-based University of Bradford School of Management, however, has been using the Blackboard VLE platform to deliver its highly successful distance learning MBA for the past six years.

ABOVE: Students view assignment submissions and comments from a single Blackboard location

“We achieved a number one ranking from the *Financial Times* for career-enhancing education and that appeals to professionals from all geographies,” says Dr Jonathan Muir, Senior Lecturer and Director of Studies at the University of Bradford. “We have medics, engineers and professionals from all industries joining the programme to upskill and improve their careers.”

Serving students from 90 countries, the University of Bradford uses Blackboard’s suite of collaborative tools for all live lectures and tutorials. Students access formative and summative assessment activities online, working alongside educators and peers from across the world.

It is said that the VLE is beginning to ‘spill out of the classroom walls’ as students use it to engage with people and concepts outside of their institution. Learning is becoming more collaborative and increasingly accessed through blogs, social media, open educational resources and shared assessment tools. Though some have argued that the ‘VLE is dead’ and better replaced with an aggregated combination of free web tools – YouTube, email, Dropbox, WordPress, Google – it is, assuredly, far from extinction.

With the widespread introduction of external content, cloud-based apps, rich media and other social tools, the VLE is no longer a ‘walled garden’. In fact, the modern VLE incorporates the best of both worlds: a structured community of learners with all the benefits of external web integration. 