

Blending SkillSoft into Higher Education

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Introduction

This short paper reports on a SkillSoft Pilot Project conducted in the Information Systems Institute, University of Salford in 2004-05. SkillSoft is one of the providers of interactive online learning content modules. These modules were used to facilitate a blend of student learning by supplementing and in some cases replacing conventional face to face sessions.

The SkillSoft package was piloted with undergraduate students taking the Systems Analysis and Design module on a part time degree and postgraduate students taking the Knowledge Management module. The rationale for deploying SkillSoft was to give students more flexibility with the time and location of their learning. Potentially they could engage with the material in the University at home or at work during their lunch break. The Pilot evaluation included interviews and focus groups with lecturers and students involved with the module. Key issues from this feedback are reported below and some of the students' views are included in the appendix.

Technical issues

There were a number of technical challenges that were experienced by the students.

The actual running of the software is very intuitive but it relies on the student's computer having the latest Java plug ins. This is not a problem on a machine that one has control over, for example you can simply download these for free from the Internet and there is a diagnostic tool that can be used to troubleshoot some of the technical problems (<http://support.skillsoft.com/customer/SPJava.htm>). However, it is more challenging if the computer is at work or in the University and the user has no administrator rights. Some computers, especially the ones at work, might not allow people to install Java plug ins for security reasons.

The main cause of technical problems was an inappropriate internet Browser type/version. The browsers supported by SkillSoft are Microsoft Internet Explorer version 4.01 with Service Pack 2 and upwards, and Netscape versions 4.06 - 4.8, 6.2, 7.0, 7.1. Some users were trying to access the content via an AOL Browser or Mozilla Firefox, neither of which are supported by SkillSoft.

Further complications arose as some students were trying to access SkillSoft from their work or home computers that did not allow the running of Java Virtual Machine. This resulted in some users having to disable their firewalls and/ or having to set up a trusted IP address for the SkillSoft server.

Blending of SkillSoft material

Integrating or "blending" the SkillSoft content was difficult. The two main areas of concern are assessment and the material offered by SkillSoft.

For the undergraduate students, there were two assignments that utilised SkillSoft, the first one totally relied on the content and the built-in testing questions that comprised 12 multiple answer questions and was weighted for 10% of the marks. The rationale here was to get students to use SkillSoft and get it to work on their computers.

The second assignment (20% weighting, 60 questions) integrated content from a core textbook, module handouts and SkillSoft. The questions used for testing the students' knowledge were integrated from various sources including SkillSoft, however answering these questions was possible without the use of SkillSoft.

Although SkillSoft includes questions for students to assess their understanding of certain topics, the answers are not recorded by SkillSoft in a way that the lecturer can see. Therefore these questions had to be transferred individually into Blackboard, which was a laborious and time consuming activity. Because transfer of questions from SkillSoft into Blackboard Assignment Manager relied on a manual "copy and paste" process, some errors occurred and resulted in confusion.

This meant that students had to login to SkillSoft, engage with the material and then login to Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment and complete the test that would be recorded and used for assessment.

The first assignment resulted in a high number of students receiving marks above 70%, but the results of the second one were more widely spread. The number of questions and the fact that these questions were either identical to the self test questions inside SkillSoft or questions that relied on other content, explain the results.

Other problems of 'blending' the SkillSoft material were related to the level of complexity. Some of the material was inappropriate for a degree level student, since a proportion of it was very basic and did not fit into the content of the academic module. Additionally, there is already a lot of content available to the lecturers that can be used by students. The existing material is in the form of handouts, website links and websites that support core text books. Text books often have existing e-learning support where students can take multiple choice questions based on the chapters that they have read.

Students' Views

In the undergraduate student focus group, feedback about the learning using SkillSoft was mixed. Some students had already come across SkillSoft in their professional lives and were comfortable and complimentary about it, however, others were not impressed saying that the learning achieved using SkillSoft was negligible.

The main issue raised by Masters' students was the simplicity of content for Masters level and even for undergraduate students. There was a feeling of prescription and that there was no encouragement for critical thinking. On the other hand it was noted that there has been a great deal of thought put into keeping students interested in the topic and going through it.

Several students commented on the aspect of e-learning, which removes the need for the lecturer. Despite the advantages listed such as the flexibility for content delivery, savings in petrol and doing the course in any location, there was a feeling that students had signed up for a course in a “traditional” style and therefore removing the lectures would have had a detrimental effect on their learning. Overall there was a feeling that the use of SkillSoft as a supplement is appropriate for *some* lectures.

The integration of SkillSoft material into the curriculum was also perceived as a problem by the students. They felt that it was not clear how much of the content was supported by the lecturers and if it was co-ordinated with the rest of the course. Students also reflected on the thought that SkillSoft could potentially be taken as a standard and utilised by several universities, they all felt that this was undesirable since the identity of the University would be lost.

Lecturers’ views

In addition to the issues of blending content described above, lecturers were also concerned with the lack of an appropriate tracking mechanism to see how the student interacted with the material. This meant the actual academic value as perceived by the lecturers was minimal.

Conclusions

Overall, SkillSoft in its current form is very limited in its use for the module we have experimented with for the following three reasons:

1. There are a number of technical access issues that could be resolved if SkillSoft were integrated with Blackboard.
2. The issue of module marks re-entry into Blackboard is causing an unnecessary administrative overhead and limited opportunity for lecturers to track the individual student’s progress.
3. Despite the identical naming of the module topics, the actual content is quite different to other sources. There are also difficulties of integrating or “blending” the SkillSoft content into the existing material.

After all, the current form of SkillSoft offered is not going to be utilised by the Systems Analysis and Design module.

There were some discussions about extracting the SkillSoft content and integrating it with Blackboard VLE, which would eliminate or at least minimise the above three issues in the following ways:

1. Access would be administered centrally via Blackboard, which provides a stable and reliable Virtual Learning Environment relative to SkillSoft.
2. There would be no need to re-enter the questions into Blackboard since these would be automatically part of it.
3. There would be more flexibility regarding which section could be included into Blackboard and which could be left out if they were not as relevant.

We believe that the provision of “large” learning content modules does not offer an attractive blending option for Higher Education. Further work can be conducted to

evaluate the option for an easy “pick and mix” of several self contained modules that were *blended* in the Virtual Learning Environment.

Appendix

Here is a representative sample of 5 Masters students who raised some of the frequently mentioned issues:

Student 1:

“Having checked the Knowledge management virtual lecture on Tuesday, the following thoughts occurred;

It might be better to do it with the sound off and just treat it as a purely visual as the woman's voice begins to grate after a while

For me it felt like a sales video of a product someone wanted me to buy.

I felt it was patronising.

I thought it repetitive and simplistic.

I also found it to be a bit evangelistic and lacking in any sort of objectivity.

I also found it slightly authoritarian and preachy.

...

On the plus side, something like this would be of huge value to someone like me for SOME of the lectures but I would be hugely reluctant to see the University purchase this as I think the educational quality and experience is vastly inferior to a lecture situation. This package seems to have no facility for feedback or clarification - which may be why it is simplistic. Politically, I can see that purchasing this would allow the University to position itself in the International Distance Learning market with local alliances through franchises etc.”

Some accounts of a student who is predominantly positive about the SkillSoft experience:

Student 2:

“On the whole I am positive about this, as it enables me to work when I want to from home, but I agree that its role should be limited to support rather than as a replacement.

The content's fine, and the speed was fine for me. I thought that the test notification is just plain wrong. I ended up taking the test before going through the material! That needs sorting. The computerised female Stephen Hawking from California really annoyed me too! Also the Americanization of words is not too clever, what on earth is System-AT-IZE? Is that really English?

One aspect that I would like to understand is how much the lecturer knows about what I have done on this virtual course. Do they know that I have only spent 45 mins on it? Do they know that I haven't done all 4 sections only the first? (Well, so far, I will do the others HONEST). Do they know what marks I have got?

I would also echo the other chaps contribution that I don't feel like I am getting value for money unless I am having a 'proper' lecture. Also, I like taking time off work to do my course and meet other part-time students socially. If the course could be done over the web, then I would loose out on all that.

In conclusion, on the whole I like it. Last year I did a 6 month Astronomy course via distance learning, and that was very similar, although it didn't have the audio or the tests (just Q and A). It also didn't have the Big Brother feel of the University knowing exactly what I am doing!

...

Just completed the 2nd chapter. I'm liking it more now. Not the content so much (it's too much of a sales pitch style, and I don't feel like students are the target audience) as the virtual learning. The main improvement is that it's much more structured over just going away and reading photocopied papers. It seems a lot of thought has gone into varying how I interact with it, in order to keep my attention.

Another thought I had was about how long this resource would be available for? If it were a standard lecture, then I would have taken notes and I would be able to keep them for as long as I want (i.e. refer to them after the course has finished). With the virtual lecture though, I imagine I will only be able to access the course for the rest of this semester.

...

I had a couple of other thoughts too:

1) Has anyone tried this from more than one PC? Does it remember where you are up to, or is the status written locally? If we were making more use of this, I can see me wanting to do parts at home and at work. I imagine people using PCs in the labs might have the same problem.

2) Referencing this material in an assignment is a bit tricky. If this were a PDF lecture then you could do a search for a section you wanted to reference, but with this virtual lecture you would have to go in and out of many screens to find what you want. Also, you can't just refer to a page either!"

Here is another comment that illustrates the many frustrated students that experience technical problems:

Student 3:

"ok...found it... playing it... keeps crashing on me... will somebody tell the designers of this program to rethink it onto another platform?!... presentations (actually anything) done in java will eat up the processor power... hence it keeps crashing on the University's (not well known for their processing speed) computers!

... at this rate, I'll be lucky if i don't start collecting my pension before I complete this thing!..."

Technical and strategic issues raised by implementation of SkillSoft in the University of Salford:

Student 4:

"My feedback on the use of the virtual medium is not positive, as I've spent several hours trying to resolve technical issues and still haven't even managed to load the lecture. I've run through the online Skillsoft test site and everything passes OK. The popup blocker and firewalls are both configured to allow access (and reluctantly I even tried turning them off altogether), but still no joy. I've also tried (lecturer's) advice regarding uninstalling/reinstalling the Java Runtime etc. - also no success.

I wish to point out that I know this is no fault of (lecturer), indeed I've enjoyed the lectures so far, so my concern is that ISI/University strategies might unnecessarily be tarnishing the good reputation of the course. It's this that makes me think that (strategically at least) the ISI/University might need to appreciate that bespoke firewall/popup configurations for Java applets are more hassle than they're worth (our department at (other institution) have come to the exact same conclusion). The alternative I'd suggest is HTTP-based applications that (in-turn) don't need special rules in firewalls. Mind you - was there really anything wrong with a normal lecture anyway? ("if it isn't broken, don't fix it").

I also concur with the other points on this discussion forum regarding the concept/nature of online material. In general I believe that the online medium should be used to SUPPORT traditional teaching and learning, it is not a substitute for it. I can't for example, ask an online lecture any questions at the exact point a topic is raised/introduced. Neither can I seek clarification or add my own views to any discussion at such a point. I hope that decision-makers for the "increased online material" policy take heed from the feedback on this site and re-evaluate the appropriateness/practicality of the policy at a qualitative and operational level."

Some typical concluding remarks:

Student 5:

"... So, to conclude... I don't think I gained a lot out of that KM lecture, and I would much rather have been in university engaging in a more meaningful, open lecture. For me, the primary use for SkillSoft would lie in its potential to SUPPORT a module, but I doubt if it could really effectively replace any part of the lecturer's role. However, if it's being used as a means of support, why not use what we already have (i.e. Blackboard) as a means of achieving the same thing. It might not be perfect, but then, SkillSoft is far from that too!"