Introducing a Learning Management System in a large first year class: Impact on lecturers and students

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Abstract

The challenges of teaching large classes are well documented in the literature on teaching in higher education. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to address some of these challenges, but, used inappropriately, technology can perpetuate entrenched practices and simply support performance models of teaching that encourage transmission approaches to learning. This article reports on the impact of implementing a learning management system (LMS) in a first year introductory macroeconomics course with 600 students in a blended learning context. Experiences of the course coordinator, lecturers and an educational technologist are discussed and data was also collected on student perceptions via a course evaluation questionnaire. Results show that the LMS was successful in a number of areas, particularly in improving the lecturers’ accessibility to students and in encouraging interaction and participations in online discussion forums.

INTRODUCTION

In line with higher education systems worldwide, there is a need to expand the South African higher education system in terms of student enrolments. Following the watershed 1994 democratic processes in South Africa, the need to meet the imperatives of equity, redress and development is an important driver for widening participation in South African higher education (Department of Education 1997). Some of the most profound effects of this massification of the system include ever-increasing class sizes which, by their very nature, introduce more diversity with regard to student characteristics such as social class, language and preparedness for higher education studies, amongst others. Information and communication technology are often seen as offering potential for managing these large classes.
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and for providing solutions to some of the teaching and learning challenges in such settings. In particular, the introduction of learning management systems (LMSs), as a strategy to enhance teaching and learning, has mushroomed in higher education institutions all over the globe (Littlejohn et al. 2007).

The implementation of a learning management system in a large class can however be a daunting prospect for lecturers, but also for students, who may not have had much previous experience in on-line learning. Heinze and Procter (2004, 10) define blended learning as ‘learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course’. A blended learning environment thus offers a combination of technology-based resources and activities with traditional face-to-face lectures, the latter of which, while having some strengths, also pose challenges to effective teaching and learning, especially in large classes, where student-student and student-teacher interaction may be limited. In such cases, an LMS offers potentially large benefits, both in terms of improved course organisation and, most importantly for enhanced learning, better and more timely communication (Nel and Wilkinson 2008).

This article presents the results of introducing an LMS into a large (600) first year economics class from the points of view of the course coordinator, lecturers, an educational technologist and the students. Findings are largely positive, especially with regard to benefits associated with using the discussion forums, but careful management is needed to maximize benefits.

BLENDED LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

Teaching strategies in large classes often place a heavy emphasis on lectures and a content driven approach (Vacharis 1999; Reimann 2004). In some cases the traditional ‘transmission’ method of teaching, often used to deal with large numbers, can create a ‘culture of dependency’, which makes students less able to achieve course outcomes, like the application of theory to real problems, while decreasing performance and morale (Gunn and Harper 2007, 140). However, large classes, in themselves, do not automatically result in poorer academic quality (Daniel 1998). This article therefore does not argue that transmission approaches do not have a valid place in large class teaching, especially at undergraduate level where students may be studying the subject for the first time and need to be introduced to the disciplinary discourses of that community. Rather, we suggest that traditional methods can be usefully supplemented with the more interactive methods enabled by an LMS. Like Pratt et al. (2001, 71), we ‘resist the tendency to adopt any single, dominant view of learning or teaching’.

The benefits of using a LMS in large class teaching are often related to improved communication between lecturers and students, but also between students themselves, using email and/or discussion forums (Eyitayo 2005; Hardy et al. 2005). A related benefit is improved access to course content, which can encourage consolidation of what has been learned in lectures (Hardy et al. 2005).
For example, Eyitayo (2005) reports on the use of a learning management system in a large (750 students) first year computing course at the University of Botswana. Students used the discussion forums quite significantly, including a number who were ‘silent readers’. Ninety-two per cent of students agreed that the use of the LMS improved the course. There is also some evidence that students who used the LMS more frequently did better. Similarly, a study of a physics foundation course at the University of Edinburgh with a class size of 242 (Hardy et al. 2005) found that students who performed well (66% and above) tended to use the LMS almost twice as much as others.

A study by Nel and Wilkinson (2008) surveyed 25 academics who were using blended learning techniques at South African universities. Most respondents agreed that the combination of face-to-face contact and online delivery was powerful, the negative aspects of each method being counteracted by the advantages of the other. Similarly, Gunn and Harper (2007, 146) found that using forums in the teaching of a large first year science course allowed an immediacy of communication that students ‘relished’ and that gave staff more freedom as to when to reply to questions and comments. Since the dialogue was ‘many to many’ far more students were able to view, if not directly participate in, the dialogue. Such forums can thus facilitate the development of ‘communities of practice’ which Wenger (2006) defines as ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’. Members of such a community can be either active ‘core’ members or more ‘peripheral’ members. This was evident in the Gunn and Harper (2007) study where initial fears about the volume of postings proved to be unfounded because students were often able to help each other, or solve problems by reading previous postings. Teachers could then add additional comments and reinforce positive contributions, which helped to build confidence and encourage peer-tutoring. The forums were also a useful way for teachers to become aware of common problem areas or misunderstandings, which could then be used as a fruitful basis for class discussion.

However, the cost, in terms of time, of using such forums can be significant and great care needs to be exercised to keep a balance between ‘social’ (i.e. non-course related) content and discussion of the course material itself. For example, Greyling and Wentzel (2007) report on the introduction of a social space in a blended learning environment (a first year economics course with 3000 students at the University of Johannesburg). In this course, the lecturer joined in the online social forum, posting poetry and other reflections and responding to student postings. Greyling and Wentzel (2007) argue that there is no trade-off between participation in the social forum and the course content forum, but rather that they are complementary and stimulate each other. In their study subject related forum participation does increase as social participation increases, but the former still only accounted for 20 per cent of postings, social posting making up 64 per cent and administrative queries 16 per cent. Given the fairly high cost, in terms of time, that the lecturer spent on social postings one has to wonder whether the outcome was worth it, or whether that time could have been spent more productively elsewhere.
THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Economics 102 is an introductory macroeconomics course at Rhodes University that runs in the second semester of the academic year. Although it is a stand-alone course, the majority of students would have registered for microeconomics 101 in the first semester. The LMS was not used in the 101 course, but students had had some experience with online resources through matching text detection software (MyDropBox) that they were required to use. All Rhodes students are provided with access to computing facilities including network and Internet access and email accounts upon registration.

At Rhodes class sizes in economics 1 have grown steadily in the last 10 years and are now consistently above 600. The course is run along traditional lines, with four lectures (repeated once on four weekdays) and one tutorial per week. Lecture groups vary in size, but average between 200 and 300, while tutorial groups are smaller at around 20. During the semester course (13 teaching weeks) each student submits 12 tutorial exercises, which are graded by tutors for formative assessment purposes, and 2 tests and 2 essays, which form part of a class mark used for summative assessment. At the end of the course, students write a 3 hour exam which makes up 70 per cent of the final mark, the class mark making up the other 30 per cent.

Although Rhodes economics 102 students receive a quite a lot of formative and summative feedback for a class of this size, lecturers were experiencing many of the common problems associated with teaching large classes: a decline in student motivation and participation in class, a lack of communication between lecturers and students, and increasingly complex administration and organization issues. In particular, the tradition of an open-door policy to encourage face-to-face consultation was proving increasingly time-consuming for staff, with long queues of students developing outside offices, especially during study week just before exams.

In 2006, the website linked to the prescribed textbook was used as an LMS for the course. However, since only those students who had bought a new textbook or paid for the access code separately could log-on, only about a third of the class (around 200 students) used it. As a result, many of the potential benefits of using an LMS were not realized. In 2007, the LMS subscribed to by Rhodes (Moodle) was used as the course website by all three teachers on the course and was available to all students without additional payment required.

Initially, the site was seen primarily as a means for the teachers and the course co-coordinator to communicate important course information to students. The site thus contained information like the course outline, learning outcomes for each week, PowerPoint slides used in lectures and links to useful resources for essays and tutorials. A hardcopy of the course booklet (containing learning outcomes, a calendar, assessment criteria, tutorial exercises and instructions on how to access the LMS) was also distributed to students. While there was some overlap with the information available on the LMS, the course booklet was still treated as the primary supplementary documentation for the course, with important information, like test dates, contained in both media. Other aims of instituting the LMS included being
able to respond more quickly to areas where students were having difficulty and maintaining better contact with the class and as an inexpensive way of providing additional resources for essays and tutorials.

On the advice of the educational technologist, discussion and news forums were also included in the course design. Students who subscribed to particular forums received copies of all postings to that forum in their email boxes. For some forums students could choose not to be subscribed, which means that they would have had to access the course site on the LMS in order to read the messages. Since students are not offered the option to unsubscribe from the News forum, lecturers can assume that students will at least receive an email copy of important course information. The news forum was consequently used by the teachers and the course coordinator in a similar fashion to the traditional departmental notice board – to communicate upcoming course activities and other administrative information, like class records, to students. Discussion forums were divided into a ‘student lounge’ where teachers would occasionally participate, but was primarily for student-to-student discussions; a forum for discussion and questions about course content; and a special study week forum for exam preparation questions, which was added later on.

Data on student use and experiences of using the LMS was collected via the course and teaching evaluation of the course coordinator, Prof. Jen Snowball, who also lectured the first half of the course. Since evaluation of the teaching of more than one lecturer at a time is not encouraged, the course evaluation was run in week six of the course and administered in tutorials (where an 80% attendance is compulsory) rather than lectures (which are not compulsory) to avoid bias.

The course evaluation contained both open- and closed-ended questions about students’ perceptions of the use of the LMS, course organization, assessment methods and the overall experience. Closed-ended questions used a scale of response options: ‘strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, not relevant’. Although not all students answered all questions, an average of 500 students responded, giving a response rate of 83 per cent. Data on the number and frequency of postings and ‘views’ (number of times logged on) by students and teachers was also collected from the LMS itself, which tracked usage. Extracts from discussion forums were also used.

**THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH**

The following section reports on the results of introducing an LMS into the economics 102 class from the perspectives of students, the course coordinator and lecturers, and the educational technologist.

**The LMS from the student perspective**

Seventy-seven per cent of students who responded to the evaluation (run about halfway through the course) agreed that the LMS had provided a useful resource. In open-ended questions, 17 per cent of students identified the LMS as one of the
excellent aspects of the course, while only 3 per cent of students identified it as a negative area in need of attention. Of the 356 students who answered the specific open-ended question on their experience of the LMS, 83 per cent reported that they had found the LMS useful, 33 per cent of whom specifically mentioned the forums. The general dimensions and data themes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Positive responses from students on the use of the LMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General dimensions</th>
<th>Data themes</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Course management and planning                          | • Course information gave students a ‘sense of direction’  
• Helped students to ‘plan ahead and prepare’  
• Provided more clarity about requirements for assignments and tests and course outcomes for each week  
• Information could be accessed from ‘anywhere’, which saved time  
• Students could check class marks and test and essay results online. |
| Enhanced learning through information availability      | • Availability of PP slides used in lectures allowed students to listen more attentively in lectures and concentrate on understanding the work  
• Useful resources and links for assignments and essays (reduced anxiety and increased enjoyment)  
• Tips and additional resources ‘increased my motivation to do well’  
• Links to other sites and current affairs (newspaper reports) increased relevance, understanding, interest and motivation. |
| Enhanced learning through many to many communication     | • Safe environment in which to ask questions: ‘Useful way to study without being afraid of asking questions’ and allows ‘open discussion’  
• Increased speed of feedback: Good way of sharing ideas and solving problems quickly; getting quick responses to questions before tests or while working on assignments (increased speed of feedback)  
• Peer tutoring: ‘Interesting to see what other students think and have intellectually stimulating discussions’; ‘explanations and opinions of other students helped me understand’; ‘questions that other students asked were useful’  
• Self assessment: ‘forum made it possible to assess my progress in comparison to other students’. |

As suggested in the literature, students used the LMS in a variety of ways. The LMS appears to have been useful in course management and planning for lecturers, but also for students, who obviously appreciated the ‘sense of direction’ communicated via the LMS, as well as the greater clarity about course outcomes and assessment methods and criteria. The improved lecturer-to-student communication also enhanced learning through the timely provision of additional resources which increased both interest in the course and motivation. The many-to-many communication provided a number of benefits including a ‘safe’ environment in which to ask questions; improved speed of feedback which helped with problem-solving; peer tutoring between students which led to ‘intellectually stimulating discussions’; and as a way of conducting informal self-assessment.

Several of the activities which Wenger (2006) describes ‘communities of practice’ engaging in can be found in the student use of the forums. For example, students used the forums to seek experience from each other (‘Guys, I’m having trouble with MyDropBox . . . anyone else having a problem?’); to request information and re-use
the assets others have built up (‘I have been trying to do the last tut, but I am having a lot of trouble finding the information. I have tried the SARB website, but it isn’t user friendly . . . has anyone else had any success?’); to discuss developments in the course management (‘I know I’m not alone on this, and it has been bothering me . . . I would like to know the reason why we get the lecture slides at the end of the week’) and, most often, for problem solving (‘. . . so does the increase in the interest rate pull aggregate expenditure in different directions?’). All these kinds of activity encourage students to adopt a more active approach to learning that allows them to internalize and apply theoretical concepts, rather than the shallow learning or memorization approach sometimes encouraged by the ‘transmission’ teaching method (Biggs 1999).

However, despite the positive comments and productive uses of the forums, in the closed-ended questions, 63 per cent of students disagreed with the statement that they thought they would do better on the course because of their reading of, and participation in, discussion forums. This may be related to the scepticism some students expressed in other parts of the evaluation about the value of peer assessment and tutoring and also partly due to the fact that, at the time the evaluation was done, the forums were not in as much use as they were later on in the course. However, the perception that peer tutoring is not valuable is something that could be fruitfully addressed (see, for example, Snowball and Sayigh 2007).

There were also some students who had negative experiences in using the LMS. These were often related to technical difficulties in logging on at the start of the course, which put some students off using it permanently and resulted in them feeling ‘left out’ of the community. In the closed-ended questions, 79 per cent of students agreed that the initial logging on was difficult and stressful. As suggested by Nel and Wilkinson (2008, 168) in their ‘framework for effective blended learning practices’, a crucial element of success for e-learning is to address the lack of skills and knowledge that students may have and to provide low-stakes practice exercises before engaging in online activities for assessment.

There were also those Economics 102 students who found online activities too time consuming, especially the discussion forums, and felt that the time could be spent more productively on some other activity. Some students also expressed disappointment with the limited course materials available on the site and requested more detailed course notes, including diagrams drawn in class. This last comment could be problematic, since it seems to indicate that students were still depending too much on the lecturer – a characteristic typical of the ‘transmission’ mode of teaching (Gunn and Harper 2007).

An interesting additional issue is the drop in the use of the prescribed textbook as a short-loan resource in the library. In the first semester (Economics 101, no course website), the library reported a total of 838 checkouts for the library copies of the prescribed textbook. In the second semester (Economics 102, LMS used) they recorded only 118 checkouts. This could partly be explained by saying that, in the first semester, students are still unsure of subject choices, so may use the library
books rather than buying their own copy, while in the second semester they have mostly decided and bought the book themselves. However, a competing explanation could be that students regarded the website, at least partly, as a substitute for the textbook, which it most certainly was not intended to be. The PowerPoint slides used in lectures, and provided on the site, were only outlines of the lectures, mostly giving headings and definitions and not including any explanations or the diagrams so important in economics. A danger could be that, if students regard slides and discussion forums as a textbook substitute, the level of overall understanding could be undermined in favour of quick, specific answers from the website.

The experiences of the course coordinator and teachers

From the perspectives of the course coordinator and teachers, the LMS greatly increased the level of efficiency with which the course was run. The news forum was a quick and inexpensive way to communicate important upcoming events, alert students to changes in course organization and even provide last minute help with tutorials and essays. Lecture slides and additional resources were also easily supplied without much technical difficulty. Posting class records online allowed students to report errors and track their progress well in advance of the exam, reducing the number of administrative queries during study week and leaving more time for dealing with content-related questions.

While the LMS lived up to the organizational and administrative communication aims of the course coordinator and lecturers, the immense usefulness of the discussion forums was unanticipated, especially during the study week just prior to the exam. As shown in Table 2, 49 per cent of all postings by students (137 out of a total 279) were made during the week before the exam. This is an indication of the effective use of the discussion forums to respond to questions when there is limited time. Face-to-face consultation during this study week (usually exhaustingly heavy for all teachers on the course) was significantly reduced. Weekly postings by the three teachers on the course were usually lower than student postings, and at quite manageable levels, partly as a result of student responses to some of the posted questions and comments.

Table 2: Number of postings and views per week by students and teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period ending (weekly)</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>Views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 August 2007</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 August 2007</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7 846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 August 2007</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 August 2007</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 September 2007</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 September 2007</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 September 2007 (Vacation)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>46 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period ending (weekly)</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>Views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 September 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 October 2007</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 October 2007</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 October 2007</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 October 2007</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 October 2007</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 November 2007 (Study week)</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>12752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>46288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more interesting was how very large the number of student views was compared to the number of student postings, increasing before essay submissions and tests, but particularly in study week before the exams when the number of views climbed to more than 12 000 (see Figure 1). The data supports the idea of a very large ‘peripheral’ community as suggested by Wenger (2006). The ratio of student postings to views was 1:93 for the last week of the course with an average ratio of 1:165 for the whole course, which suggests a much more efficient use of the lecturers’ time than face-to-face consultations generated, especially during the study week when there were no scheduled lectures and the LMS allowed efficient one-to-many interaction. While teacher postings and views remained at fairly low levels, student views never dropped below 1000 per week, except during the September vacation.
Another useful application of the LMS in this blended learning setting was the use of online forum discussion topics as a stimulant to face-to-face lecture discussions and vice versa. Parts of the forum discussions were reproduced in lectures (without the names of the contributors) and were effective in stimulating further discussions in class. Nel and Wilkinson (2008) also found that linking class activities with online activities increased participation in both areas.

Questions being asked on the forums were a quick way for teachers (and tutors) to identify areas where students were having difficulty and to respond before misconceptions became entrenched. Students also sometimes used the forums to pick up on and discuss comments made in lectures: ‘I noticed that you kept on saying [in] the class today that South Africa is a developing country, but I think it has characteristics of a developing and developed country at the same time’. In general, the level of two-way communication between students and lecturers was vastly improved.

To investigate whether using the LMS (and the increased number of students who accessed it) had an impact on the general quality of the course, the relevant evaluation results from 2006 (when only a third of the class logged on to the textbook website) were compared with the 2007 feedback. While, of course, not all the differences can be attributed to the LMS use, no other big changes were made to the course between the 2006 and 2007 evaluations, both of which were conducted for the first half of the course only, with the same person lecturing. Results are reported in Table 3.
Table 3: Comparison between 2006 and 2007 evaluations (closed-ended questions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>2006 (Percentage agree/strongly agree)</th>
<th>2007 (Percentage agree/strongly agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer demonstrates good communication and presentation skills</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer is sensitive to student learning needs and responds to those effectively</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer gives personal attention to individual students</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer stimulates my interest in this course/module</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I found this course a good learning experience</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer uses appropriate teaching methods for achieving course/module outcomes</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lecturer ensures that assessment tasks are valuable learning experiences</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Except in one case, students were more positive about the 2007 course than in the previous year. A big increase in the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that the lecturer was sensitive to student needs and that the lecturer gave personal attention to students can be attributed to the increased student-lecturer communication via the LMS. It is also encouraging that more students found the course interesting and that they found the teaching methods appropriate. A concern is the sharp decline in the number of students who rated the course as a good learning experience overall. While the percentage of students who disagreed with this statement did not increase by much (2% in 2006 to 8% in 2007), a much bigger percentage of the 2007 group chose the neutral option (12% in 2006 and 28% in 2007). It is not known to what extent the use of the LMS impacted on this result, but the possibility that its use could detract from the overall experience should not be discounted.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIST

While an increasing number of lecturers in Higher Education are starting to implement some form of technology-based learning in their teaching and courses, ICTs are often used to perpetuate entrenched models of teaching which see lecturers as sources of knowledge and students as the empty receptors of this knowledge. Despite the wide range of possible teaching strategies offered by learning management systems, lecturers would often use the web as a repository of resources, which is not very different from the increased use of presentation software in face-to-face lecturers in that it promotes a performance model of teaching and transmission modes of learning (Morrow 2007). While such ‘pedagogically poor’ applications of technology (Wilson in Unwin 2007, 302) certainly have a valuable role to fulfill in contemporary
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higher education, it is the more interactive uses of the web that seem to offer greater potential for enhancing student learning. In large class settings such as this one, the potential benefits of using technology further extend to administrative applications as well as inter-personal relations between lecturers and students and amongst students themselves. This research project supports the notion that the web has the potential to foster the development of online communities of practice, which is well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Bender 2003 and Salmon 2003). However, the research data also demonstrates that students themselves are often resistant to the notion that their peers might have valuable contributions to make to their learning, especially at first year level.

According to Mishra and Koehler, (2006, 1029) ‘...there is no single technological solution that applies for every teacher, every course, or every view of teaching. Quality teaching requires developing a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between technology, content, and pedagogy, and using this understanding to develop appropriate, context-specific strategies and representations’. By engaging in technology, the lecturers in this course have started to explore the potential benefits of technology for the teaching of a course in their discipline and for their students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show that, even in a first year class with relatively little experience of the use of ICTs in teaching and learning, the use of the LMS by students developed fairly quickly and increased as the course progressed. However, most students felt some anxiety about logging on to the LMS initially and there is a danger that those who experience significant problems at the start may give up altogether and feel left out of the developing online community. The process should thus be carefully managed, perhaps including an assessment of the information literacy skills of incoming students and the provision of programmes to address potential gaps.

While using an LMS to manage administrative and organizational matters and for making more course resources available is effective and useful in large classes, this case study found that the discussion forums brought the greatest improvements in teaching and learning. The increased communication, via the forums, helped lecturers respond to problem areas quickly and to be more sensitive to student learning needs. Student-to-student responses can help to build confidence and interest in the course, but the value of peer tutoring (perhaps especially at first year level) needs to be emphasized.

During study week (and before essay deadlines and tests), the forums proved to be an effective, and more efficient, substitute for face-to-face consultations. The number of postings was always manageable from a teacher point of view, and the time savings were significant.

While both ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ participation in the discussion forums can encourage more active, deeper learning activities, a possible danger is that students substitute the ‘quick fix’ answers obtained on forums for a more holistic
understanding. Emphasis should be placed on the complementary use of the LMS, rather than seeing it as a substitute for lectures and prescribed texts.

REFERENCES


