

Delivering E-learning for Information Services in Higher Education

By Paul Catherall

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Reviewed by Ruth Rikowski

This book provides a wealth of very valuable information in regard to the delivery of e-learning for Information Services in the Higher Education sector.

Catherall begins by considering exactly what e-learning is, and defining our terms is always a very good place to start, in my view. Catherall says that, basically, e-learning is: "...a computer-based form of learning experience" (p.1). Whilst a wider definition encompasses any technology that allows "...for the delivery of learning resources or communication between tutor and students..." (pp.1-2). This broader definition also includes the use of audio, visual and other media. Finally, e-learning can also be considered within a wider educational and pedagogical approach. This wider definition clearly has far-reaching implications.

As Catherall says:

E-learning and related systems used to support learning and teaching are quickly becoming an important feature of the rapidly changing climate in HE provision (p. 10).

He notes the fact that more people than ever are going to university today, but many students now have to face financial difficulties, as well as feeling compelled to gain more marketable skills. All this has led to a demand for more core study skills and

...flexible approaches to support course delivery in a low-contact study context (p.75).

So e-learning has a very valuable role to play in society today, and the importance of e-learning is likely to rise still further in the future, especially as more people undertake part-time study and seek alternative methods of study. Within this, though, the importance of face-to-face teaching should also not be forgotten, in my view.

Catherall argues that one of the most important characteristics of e-learning lies in the fact that many systems endeavour to provide an interface that is both intuitive and usable. Thus, the human-computer interaction side of this technology is very important and is likely to continue to be developed in the future. This extends to usability for those with disabilities.

Catherall's book includes chapters on topics such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), Training and User Support, Accessibility and Legal Issues, Other Online Learning Tools and Quality Assurance and Monitoring.

In the opening chapter Catherall makes the point that careful thought needs to be given to the selection and deployment of an e-learning system. Due consideration needs to be given to factors such as the requirements for technical expertise to build a server for running e-learning software; finance, including the cost of staffing, software purchase and licenses and various hardware requirements, in order to provide an e-learning system as a network service.

Virtual Learning Environments are examined in chapters 2 and 3, and as Catherall says:

The VLE or virtual learning environment is a phrase used to define systems comprising a range of e-learning characteristics and features (p.21).

As he notes, the VLE has two main functions – effective interaction between tutors and students and content distribution. The book also includes research undertaken by Catherall on VLEs across a number of different UK He institutions. Other sections include choosing a VLE, managing the VLE, managing users of the VLE and various VLE courses.

In Chapter 5, Catherall considers '**Accessibility and legal issues**', focusing in particular on disability and he notes that:

The rise of electronic systems to facilitate traditional information services has prompted legislation and sector-led recommendations to ensure system accessibility for users with disabilities and other access problems. (p.87).

Catherall highlights the fact that many students today have disabilities and cites a report by the City University, London (2003) which suggests that 4.6% of HE students in the UK had declared a disability and that this is likely to increase in the future. Common disabilities and access problems include blind or partially sighted; motor, mobility or dexterity; cognitive; colour blindness; epilepsy; deafness/hearing impairment; reading and writing difficulties.

Catherall considers some of the wide range of software that exists to facilitate access to web resources for disabled users, such as the fact that Netscape Navigator 7:

...provides a 'text zoom' feature to increase text size; fonts and colours may also be set within browser preferences (p.98).

Meanwhile, the Microsoft Windows XP operating system provides various accessibility tools for those with disabilities, such as screen magnifiers and 'sticky keys' to access Windows features, using key combinations pressed incrementally.

Catherall also highlights the fact that there is a range of legislation today that defines the responsibilities of HE in regard to the provision of accessible services. He considers accessibility and standards issues in general, emphasising that:

...in recent years, the World Wide Web Consortium (or W3C) has strengthened co-operation with software developers, accessibility organisations and other stakeholders to develop industry standards for the Web (p.92).

Catherall points out the fact that W3C is the most influential standards-making body for the World Wide Web, whilst another major standard for web resources are the US Section 508 Rehabilitation Act guidelines. Furthermore, e-learning systems can also be assessed or audited for accessibility and Catherall considers some of the tools that are available here, such as W3C HTML Validator and Bobby, which is a system that checks web resources for WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) compliance.

Chapter 6 covers some other online learning tools. Clearly, as Catherall points out, Microsoft Office is the most widely used software supporting the delivery of effective e-learning. However, as it is a commercial application, this can limit availability, and, as Catherall says, disabled users might not be able to view some file formats. Other tools covered in the book include scanning and OCR, document authoring, web authoring (HTML based) and web authoring tools, including web editing software for use with VLEs (such as Amaya and Microsoft FrontPage) and web-based multimedia.

There is also a section on Learning Objects and VLEs. These learning objects include web-based educational resources, sequential learning presentations and interactive assessments, and can be viewed via a web browser. As Catherall says:

The central aim of learning objects is to provide a standard for the creation of reusable content, allowing practitioners to develop course

materials that are not dependent on any specific VLE system and that may be migrated or reused in other contexts (p.126).

There are also various standards for Learning Objects and a number of organisations that contribute to the development of these standards, and these are also considered in the book.

Chapter 7 considers 'Quality Assurance and Monitoring', and covers areas such as system selection criteria and fitness for purpose and system management and administration to achieve quality service provision. Such quality services usually also have a mission statement and Catherall discusses this, along with various policies and procedures that need to be adopted. Other areas covered in this chapter include system integrity and reliability, standards compliance, system reports and statistics and external auditing.

In Catherall's concluding chapter he considers some trends in HE and IT that might shape e-learning in the future. As he points out, in general:

E-learning will play an important role in facilitating low-contact, part-time study necessitated by increasing employee participation in HE ... (p.149).

Thus, e-learning is likely to have an ever-increasingly important part to play in society in the future. 'Worldwide e-learning' is one of the trends which is now gathering pace, with organisations such as the Norwegian University NKI and WUN, the Worldwide Universities Network now delivering HE courses online.

The characteristics of this new global educational market are characterised by distance learning, student-led study approaches and use of VLE systems to provide communication, collaboration and content delivery functions (p.147).

Furthermore, there is the 'e-tutor', whose role encompasses a wide range of activities, such as e-learning management interface to upload course materials, managing user access to online courses and interacting with students via communication features. Other trends Catherall focuses on include 'Mobile learning' (m-learning), Ubiquitous e-learning and various other e-learning devices for the future, such as TV- based Internet, games stations, smart phones and multimedia systems.

Catherall concludes by saying that he hopes that his book:

...has provided some insight into the emerging world of e-learning, virtual learning environments and related technology (p.155).

Well, in my view, it most undoubtedly does! This is a very valuable, useful and informative book for all those that want to find out more about delivering e-learning for information services in higher education. It is also a very useful reference tool, which the reader can return to as and when the need arises.

The book includes a useful glossary of terms, a bibliography and an index.

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Another version is available on amazon.co.uk and amazon.com – see:

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