

Implementing the Guided Learner Journey: A case study of the evolution of institution-wide partnerships, through a set of pedagogic principles

Samantha Clarkson, Lucy Bamwo, Tamara Benford-Brown
University of Hertfordshire

Abstract

This case study reflects on institution-wide partnerships through a period of significant change at the University of Hertfordshire. It describes how a review of the online learning environment led to the development of pedagogical principles and the eventual roll-out of the new technologies necessary to realise these. Student technology mentors were central to the training and support framework needed to implement this change. This case study explores the successes and challenges faced by the staff and students and summarises the key recommendations for effective partnerships.

Introduction

This case study examines the shared experiences of staff and students at the University of Hertfordshire during a challenging institution-wide implementation of a new online learning environment (OLE), underpinned by a set of pedagogical principles called the 'Guided Learner Journey' (GLJ). The implementation involved over 1,200 academic staff and 24,500 students across 3,000 modules. We shall here explore the developing partnership between staff and students, assessing to what extent the guiding principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility of partnership were realised (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014).

Institution and historical context

The University has nine academic schools and a community of over 24,000 students, who are based on campus and at partner institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) and overseas. Delivery of courses ranges from blended (on-campus) to purely online. By 2014, the University had a very well-established OLE, called StudyNet, that had been developed in-house and had been running for over twelve years. The University was the UK Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching in Blended Learning from 2005 to 2010 and StudyNet was integral to the achievement of this. The majority of academic staff and students worked regularly with StudyNet to support teaching and learning and their feedback on the platform was largely positive. The system developers were reactive to the demands of users and created bespoke solutions which supported University processes. However, some expectations were no longer being met – for example, a growing demand for usability on mobile devices and effective integration with such third-party services as video-streaming and social media.

Around five years ago, the University carried out a review of the OLE. As one of the University's core values is to transform lives, a key tenet of the review was to understand how students could best be supported to engage in effective learning (Barton and Bowie, 2018). The review was extensive – including open consultations with students and staff to find out what they wanted and needed from the OLE – and from it, the University drew up (figure 1) some key aspirations:

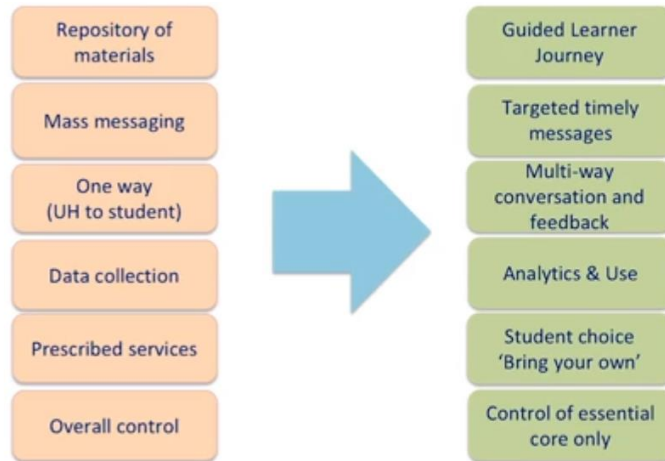


Figure 1: Key aspirations – StudyNet to future OLE

Following two institution-wide pilots, the GLJ principles (figure 2) were developed and included in tender documentation to support the selection of a new system. In December 2016, the University partnered with Instructure Canvas, to provide an OLE, and with Talis Aspire, to provide an integrated online reading list management system, both of which would provide the underpinning infrastructure for the GLJ.

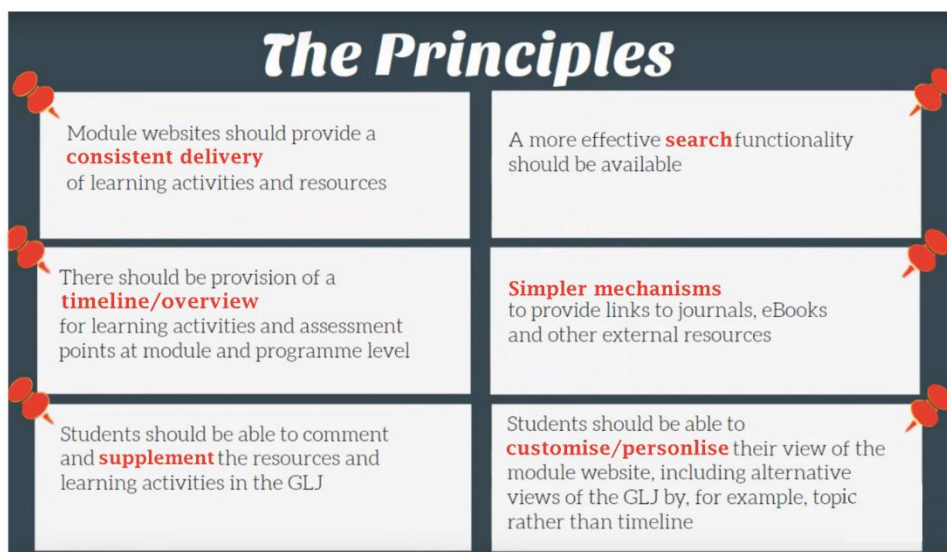


Figure 2: Guided Learner Journey principles

Implementation

A support team for each academic school was set up to help academic staff to make the transition from StudyNet to Canvas and Talis Aspire. The team comprised a member of academic staff in the role of school champion, the school’s information manager, an educational technologist, a member of the StudyNet development team, a learning and teaching specialist, a training co-ordinator and student technology mentor/s (STM/s). The implementation was phased over two years. In the first year (2017/18) all level 4 modules and new modules were to be migrated to incorporate the GLJ principles, using Canvas and Talis Aspire. In the second year, this was extended to levels 5, 6, 7 and partner institutions.

Students as change agents and partners has been part of our University culture for the last decade and such roles as STMs have been present in several projects (Jefferies, Russell and Alltree, 2010, p.46). At a basic level, the recruitment of students provided extra capacity and flexible staffing to support group and one-to-one training and guidance. Most of us – the staff closely involved in the implementation of the GLJ – wanted to ensure that student voice was represented at each stage of implementation, continuing the process through which the GLJ principles had been initially developed. Although the University has a well-established staff-student partnership network, sharing good practice and valuing this way of working, there was inevitable challenge in migrating staff to a completely new environment, including, in some areas, pockets of reluctance to working with students in building new module websites. However, the established culture of student-staff partnership and the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the mentors in realising the GLJ principles meant that all academic schools had active STMs during the second year of the roll-out. Following the brief trial of a variety of training and support activities, we created (figure 3) a comprehensive training and support framework:

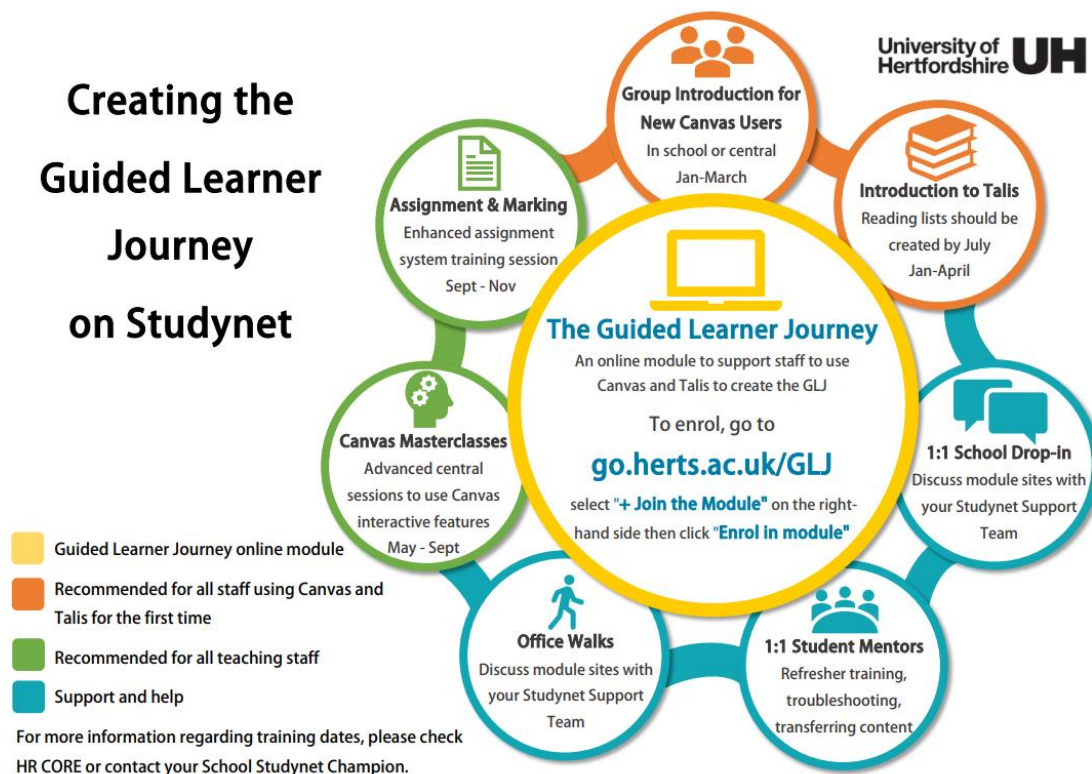


Figure 3: Creating the Guided Learner Journey support and training

Although the role is specifically mentioned as one element of the framework, STMs were involved in every element of the training and support programme. Initially, the pressures of delivering the first phase of implementation meant that the partnership was slow to develop, but, over time, the STMs' influence, confidence and skills grew with their involvement at every stage of the programme. As the two-year implementation phase unfolded, STMs acted as partners to help shape student communication, training and technical developments and to support academic staff to engage effectively with the GLJ principles. As a direct result of the influence of student partnership, the direction and shape of the implementation evolved from the initial path envisaged by the project management group at the start of the process.

STM perspectives

Tamara's experience

"I joined the University of Hertfordshire in 2017, the first year that Canvas and Talis was used by students. When the university was recruiting for additional Student Technology Mentors, I believed I had a good understanding of the platform from an early stage, therefore, I felt I could communicate clearly how to use the new platform to create the Guided Learner Journey. I benefitted from the role of Student Technology Mentor by developing my professional development and communication skills. I learnt how to adapt my communication methods in response to the academics' preferences, experience and expertise. I felt that I was treated as a member of staff and part of the project team, which helped me to build these essential workplace skills.

"One of the areas where I was able to help staff design and create their module sites was to offer the student perspective or experience, particularly when a module is managed by several members of staff. The default here might be for staff to divide up the site based on their areas of responsibility. However, in line with the Guided Learner Journey principle of 'a timeline or overview', I could explain and demonstrate an approach that can be clearer and easier to navigate.

"The main challenge that I experienced was that some members of staff expected me to just do the work for them, as some staff viewed the OLE as a technical implementation rather than part of their teaching and were not engaged in reflecting on the student experience of their module site design. To work with this challenge, I had to use and develop my diplomacy skills and draw upon the expertise of all staff in the project management team to gradually communicate the vision to staff and support them to achieve it.

"By working together through a staff-student partnership, I believe that it helps create better relationships overall within the university community - which in turn, can benefit academic achievement and the experience of attending university. For example, after working with members of staff it helped me, personally, to 'break the stigma' that the only contact a student can have with staff is during academic contact hours; and actually, many staff were available to guide students throughout their whole university experience."

Other student insights

Other STMs reflected on two main areas: a) personal learning of the skills they gained and b) acquired understanding of the role of academics and large-scale change management. The STMs gained valuable digital skills – too often missing from student experience at university (Newman *et al.*, 2018). In addition, they reported a developing professionalism and a new grasp of the complexity of academic workload and University systems. Some mentors reflected on change management they had experienced in previous jobs, viewing approaches and activities they had learnt about and making comparisons between the approaches at the University and those elsewhere. Some mentors also reported that they had learnt more about why some employees are not enthusiastic about change and, where this is the case, how to work with individuals and across an organisation. As a result of this real experience of working on a complex project, mentors reported that they had much better examples to draw upon when applying for their first graduate post.

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During the implementation phase of the GLJ, the STM team met regularly to reflect on and share approaches to practice. We have also subsequently had the opportunity to present at a number of internal and external conferences, to share our work. Through this process, the team of mentors devised the following recommendations for our own organisation and other universities to bear in mind for encouraging effective staff-student partnership work:

- **Payment – offer an attractive rate of pay**

STMs were paid a good hourly rate for their time. This demonstrated equality in the value placed on staff and student time and expertise. Our aim was also to attract all students to the role, not only those who could provide their time on a volunteer basis.

- **Flexibility – offer flexible working patterns**

STMs were employed on a flexible contract to work up to fifteen hours per week. Students were free to work as many or as few of these hours as they wanted, in acknowledgement of their other commitments.

- **Status – treat partners as equals**

STMs were part of the team of professional and academic staff. At the University, we are proud of our 'FACES' values (Friendly, Ambitious, Collegiate, Enterprising and Student-focused) and it was important that the support teams, including cross-departmental staff and student roles, operated with these values at their core. At the end of the second year, the team was also nominated for the annual Vice-Chancellor Staff Awards in the 'Team of the Year' category.

- **Impact – provide regular feedback**

During the implementation phase, we undertook regular evaluation exercises to understand the impact of the training and support programme and make adjustments. Work with STMs was often referred to and some staff sent unsolicited testimonies of the impact of interaction with a member of the team. This was fed back to individuals and the whole team, to shape approaches and support team motivation and enthusiasm.

- **Professional development – provide opportunities to develop transferable skills**

As part of our student focus, it is important that the roles we offer for students have value beyond immediate project or task delivery. Where possible, we endeavoured to offer additional opportunities to develop, alongside skills intrinsic to the role, such real-world skills as communication and digital expertise. These included planning and delivering presentations at conferences, writing this paper and supporting STMs to achieve Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA).

Staff perspectives

Many staff involved in the project management and support teams wanted to create roles where students could act as partners shaping project priorities, communication and pedagogical practice. Throughout the project, there was a tension between this approach

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and the perception, in some areas, of students as objects or resources (Fletcher, 2017). Such a tension was evident in group training session discussions, when some staff assumptions about how students used – or should use – the OLE were at odds with those key aspirations for an OLE (figure 1) as had been derived from the staff and student consultation.

However, some formal and informal feedback gathered throughout the project revealed that some staff who were initially reluctant or sceptical about the place of a staff/student partnership in this type of work were gradually won over. The different dynamic and emotional element of working in partnership (Baptista, 2018) were discussed. Staff often compared their experience of working with an STM to seeking help or support from an academic peer; they reflected on the time, patience and technical expertise that STMs demonstrated. Opinion was divided about the ‘embarrassment factor’ that staff might feel when asking for help in the use of the new OLE. Some staff maintained that they did not want to reveal to students how challenging they found using the technology, while others reflected that they felt it was much less embarrassing to talk to an STM than to an immediate colleague. These experiences align with the findings from the 2014 Higher Education Academy report:

“Working and learning in partnership heightens an awareness of conflicting priorities and tensions between the different perspectives and motivations of those involved, and it raises challenges to existing assumptions and norms about higher education.” (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014, p.9)

There are, of course, staff who have not engaged with STMs and who reported in the study that they would be reluctant to do so in future. Though this may be the case, the powerful testimony of staff who report that they – and, in turn, their students – have benefited from this staff/student partnership work would indicate that the investment in this role was worthwhile. Further work is required to build a universal culture of students as partners in learning (Healey *et al.*, 2015); however, a new reciprocity and respect did emerge through a significant number of staff/student interactions. For some of those involved, a substantial shift had taken place in the perception of students as equals in the development of the effective use of the OLE, rather than as mere customers or campaigners (Bryson, 2014). The University is committed to partnership and has provided funding for a further academic year, enabling STMs across the University to work in partnership with staff to enhance and embed the GLJ principles in modules. Another partnership that the University has committed to is students in the paid role of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) advocates. The BAME advocates are reviewing module sites using our inclusive curriculum and GLJ checklist (University of Hertfordshire, 2019). We are working with staff and students to frame and carry out this work in partnership, rather than with students as informers or consultants (Healey and Healey, 2019). Partnerships are understandably tough and challenging. However, so many positive transformations have occurred in staff perceptions, including our own, that the University continues to value and invest in staff/student partnerships. The expectation is that partnership culture will become more embedded.

Lessons learnt

The staff/student partnership was planned at the start of the implementation and this partnership evolved over time. Our student partners were not as empowered from the start

as we had hoped and their voice was not as evident as it was much later in the project. With hindsight, we could have given them a more significant platform for their voice to be heard, by including them much earlier in the strategic planning of the project. The project management group did have student representation from the Student Union, but the STMs should have been present at all levels of project management as they had invaluable insight into what was happening on the ground from both a staff and student perspective. Their views could – and should – have had more influence in the strategic decisions that were made.

In the early stages of implementation phase, events moved very quickly and all staff involved were on a steep learning curve. STMs reported that, during this time, communication and regular contact with their in-school line manager was sporadic and mentors could feel unsure about the purpose of their role and the project priorities; we are thus attempting, as we continue with the STM role, to address this uncertainty by managing the team centrally. From our perspective, we also found that we could work more flexibly with a central team of STMs, operating in an agile way to tackle an unforeseen issue or deliver a particular project objective.

Conclusion

From our perspective as training co-ordinators, it is difficult to imagine how we would have supported academic staff to use Canvas and Talis to embed the GLJ principles without the input of the STM team. Working in partnership with the STMs has also kept us student-focused and helped to deliver those principles set out by staff and students during the previous years of consultation and piloting. There is still more to do to ensure that management of change affecting staff and students involves true staff/student work in partnership and we hope that our experiences, as discussed in this paper, will influence investment in such student roles as these, that do have an impact far beyond that of just successful project delivery.

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