

The Impact of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) on the learning
experience of the students at UWTSD London Campus

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Introduction

The beginning of this year saw a monumental change in everybody's lives and livelihoods. A new and unheard-of disease sprung up and was deadly, killing millions throughout the globe. The introduction of this virus has invited the need for social distancing, mask wearing, and numerous lockdowns combined with a location-specific tier system. As a result, our university has had to resort to a virtual learning environment (VLE) to avoid mass spreading of the coronavirus. Throughout this essay I will consider whether this new learning environment is for the better or worse, using my own primary research, as well as some secondary.

Rationale

The reason behind this research is primarily to observe how different learning through a screen has been for students in comparison to face to face teaching, which is what the majority of us have been used to for our whole lives. Another reason for this paper is to determine whether VLE is something to be continued, even after the eradication of the coronavirus. This could be because it is more efficient for people- rather than spending time travelling to and from lectures they can perform further research, or even complete work set at a quicker pace.

Research Objectives

The broad research aim is to discover the impact of VLE, but the objectives are somewhat distinct. Firstly, whether students would prefer to continue in a VLE rather than learning in person. Secondly, whether VLE is better to learn from than face-to-face meetings, and lastly if VLE is really the way forward for society as a whole, regardless of the existence of the coronavirus.

Review of Literature

The primary data I have used is my own survey, which was conducted on 27 people, with each answer having anonymous votes. This was beneficial because it meant voters could avoid any possible judgement and vote how they truly feel as they will not suffer from any scrutiny. This makes the research far more accurate, and therefore my analysis is much more relevant. Another positive of my research is that it is relative to the university I am researching, so results are much more tailored to UWTSD London Campus. This also means answers are more accurate, because the theory is specific to the university and those who have experienced it first-hand will have much more valid opinions as to how the university's VLE is run and its impact. However, with a significant magnitude of people attending the university, my sample size may be too small or unrepresentative. In order to combat this, I specifically chose a range of people- people who lived near to campus, those who lived further or at home, students with full access to a laptop and internet and all required resources, as well as students who had to travel to and from a specific location such as a library whenever they had to attend a virtual class. This meant my research was as accurate as it possibly could have been, despite the small sample size. However, despite my attempt

to have a range of voters, I could have improved my diversity by factoring whether wealth was a determinant to the ease of VLE- possibly to pay for electricity or extra usage of Wi-Fi.

The secondary data is a book written in 2015 which analyses the effectiveness of online and blended learning. This book is useful as it gives a variety of perspectives and answers, both subjective and objective, to help come to a justified conclusion. However, as this book was written pre-coronavirus, where online lessons were incredibly less frequent, it is much easier to criticise the uses of VLE, as we did not need it as we need it now.

Results, analysis, and discussion

Primary data

I will begin with my primary data: a survey I have carried out and asked 27 people to fill out regarding the impact of VLE. The first and simplest question asked was “are you enjoying VLE?” to which a supermajority of 85% said yes. This would incite the idea that VLE is not draining, as students are clearly enjoying it on the whole, and it does not seem to be an inconvenience to people’s lives. However, a stronger argument may be that 15% of people still said no, which is also a somewhat significant part, and these people should not go unheard. If it were the case that 100% of people enjoyed learning face-to-face, VLE would be less ideal, so we cannot yet draw clear conclusions. This question was straightforward and easy to understand, but it is an incredibly subjective question, so it may not be helpful for records in the case of determining whether VLE is logistically beneficial- in terms of efficiency or extra research time. A contradicting argument to this would be that subjective questions are exactly what we need to analyse the impact of VLE because it is an impact on people and human behaviour, for which we need to understand how they feel. I believe this is the stronger argument because VLE will directly impact motivation to work, so we must see how the recipients of the education feel when their learning environment has changed in order to gauge a true understanding of the effects and impact it has had. So far, it seems motivation is high as people enjoy the new environment, which may suggest a future for VLE post- coronavirus.

As a result, we should look at a question which allows the two learning environments to be compared. My question was whether VLE made it easier to do research, with the options of strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. 70% of the surveyed voters agreed/ strongly agreed, which is another clear indicator that VLE seems to have the right impact on students, as they do have enough time to research more, considering the idea that they no longer have to spend time travelling to and from classes or even possibly rushing to get ready in the morning which could tire them out. Therefore, VLE is easier, we can assume, because it is more convenient for people rather than the realities of everyday life when learning physically. To add to this, 15% of people were apathetic, which further suggests that VLE could be a desirable tool in the future, as again a strong majority were in favour of/ unaffected by the change from face-to-face learning to a VLE mode of education. In order to make my research more accurate, I could have asked people to give a numerical percentage of approval in order to make the answers more accurate than simply five worded answers or removed the “neither agree nor disagree” choice in order to

push people to sway one way or another. Although, if I had done this, it may have resulted in some voters skipping the question as there was not a choice which applied to them or giving the wrong answer in order to move on/ because they were unsure of what to pick otherwise.

The surveyors were asked to rate VLE on a scale of 1-10, 1 being bad and 10 being very good. Only 10% of voters voted below a 5, which would suggest that a very small amount of people are not in favour of the continued use of VLE. 90% voting 5 and above is a very strong reason to continue VLE, as it has had a clearly positive impact. This data is useful because it is both easy to understand as well as numerical so interpreting the data is also fairly simple. This does not describe each person's individual experience in words however, which will obviously vary from each person, so to confine them to a number is perhaps unfair. Therefore, this result, although overwhelmingly positive, should not be taken as the be all and end all, as it is easy to assume enjoyment when there is no qualitative data to consider.

This brings me to one of the last results I shall consider from my primary research: how each voter feels about VLE in a quantitative method, with the choice of answer being poor, below average, average, good, or excellent. A staggering 93% of voters answered average and above, which strengthens the idea of the positive impact of VLE, as stated previously. This would suggest that the idea of VLE being positively impactful has been strengthened as there is both qualitative and quantitative data to support this claim, but as there were only five options it could be argued that this is simply a redo of the qualitative question, but more condensed, because the scale is from 1-5 rather than 1-10, which actually makes it less accurate. Therefore, to improve this question, I would have either extended the range of words used to answer this question, or let voters describe it themselves. However, if the voters chose themselves, this would not be a useful way of collecting data, as it would require subjective input as to whether the answers are positive or negative, which invites the need for bias and therefore damages the validity of the question and its answers.

Secondary data

Despite my primary data consistently displaying a positive desire for VLE, some secondary research argues against it. For example, body language is much more difficult to read in a virtual environment, where facial expressions such as confused eyebrows may go amiss because the instructor is more focussed on displaying a certain screen or perhaps not being able to see their own pupils (Koç, Liu and Wachira, 2015). For this reason, VLE may not have such a positive impact on students as we first presume, because they can go unheard or unseen. This would therefore cause less people to understand the content and may result in a qualitative negative impact as a direct result of VLE, whether it is lower attendance rates or even lower grades/ marks than students may have got if they were to learn in a physical classroom.

The problem with this theory is that we assume these people are afraid to ask questions or raise issues when they appear. This may not be the case and, VLE may, in fact, make it easier for students as they can simply email their instructor at any time of day rather than having

to be in person to receive a response. This therefore makes VLE positively impactful, as convenience increases and learning is improved.

Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, it is clear that VLE has had a good impact on the students at UWTSD London Campus. This is mainly concluded from my primary research, which has all suggested that VLE is beneficial and my sample has been consistently happy with the new learning environment. Although it may come as an inconvenience for some, either due to miscommunication between instructor and pupil when one does not understand something, or finance as a struggle to afford electricity or Wi-Fi, these issues are generally much easier to fix thanks to public libraries, as well as the higher availability of online resources and help from the university itself, which makes it much easier to access online resources. This means that it is more convenient for the pupil as they do not have to spend time commuting and can therefore spend more time in further research.

References

- Koç, S., Liu, X. and Wachira, P., 2015. Assessment In Online And Blended Learning Environments. Information Age Publishing, pp.16