(a) Educational/Pedagogical/Systemic Issues that the Project seeks to address

Practical English for University Studies (PEUS) is a new ELC course developed for the 4-curriculum as part of the Language and Communication Requirement (LCR) of the General University Requirement (GUR). It meets the language needs of students who enter PolyU with a DSE level 3 in English. The aim of this project was to pilot the use of Blackboard to enhance the out-of-class learning of these students, who are expected to do 84 hours of out-of-class study as part of the course.

The out-of-class support work (IndiWork), previously offered on the ELC Moodle learning management system (LMS), is an integral part of the course, tied closely to the in-class materials. Students must successfully complete 50% of this IndiWork to complete the course. It provides extra material to reinforce what has been learnt in class and is designed to be completed throughout the course, concurrently with in-class material. The timing of the IndiWork exercises is suggested by the in-class materials, so students see a note (See Fig 1 below) referring them to the appropriate IndiWork exercise in their class notes. Because only 50% completion is required, it is also designed to foster independent language learning by allowing students to choose which aspects of their language learning to prioritise.
In addition to the IndiWork, students must submit a digital story as part of the assessed work for this course. By adding this to the speaking and writing assessments more commonly found in English language learning, the ELC seeks to cater to the different learning styles of students with differing backgrounds and encourage students to explore new literacies.

ELC has previously used Moodle 1.7 as its LMS. The ELC technical team built very useful add-ons to customize the features for the different ELC subjects, but there were limits as to what this version could do. For example, the system limited student submissions of the digital story to a file size of 8MB, which had become impossible for students to meet as video editing software becomes increasingly sophisticated. The script for the digital story also had to be uploaded to Turnitin, hosted on Blackboard, so students had two access points to submit a single assessment. In addition, the Moodle LMS did not allow teachers the flexibility to upload their own additional materials for students, if they design them to meet a particular group’s needs.

This project aimed to address these issues, by exploring the use of the video streaming server for student submissions of the digital story, and allowing a single access point for both Turnitin and the digital story submission. It also aimed to enhance the teaching and learning experience by allowing teachers more autonomy to tailor their online materials for individual groups, while offering a seamless IndiWork experience for students.

This project has also been seen by the ELC as a prototype to inform the Centre as it decided whether to continue in its independent use of Moodle in the 4-year curriculum or whether to switch its LMS to Blackboard.

Objectives

1. Migrate PEUS online Indiwork from Moodle to Blackboard in order to be aligned to PolyU strategic objectives in Teaching and Learning
2. Provide a single access point for students to submit their digital stories as well as their digital story scripts
3. Integrate the LCR PEUS subject seamlessly with the institutional LMS, Blackboard, in which Turnitin and eSFQ are the requirements of a GUR subject
4. Create a prototype of an online module that could be replicated for other subjects in future semesters.
5. Create a new operational structure within Blackboard where teaching staff have more autonomy to upload their own additional class materials
6. Provide staff development for ELC staff who are teaching PEUS on the effective use of Blackboard.
7. Enable ELC staff who are teaching PEUS to have more flexibility to design and deliver additional innovative online class materials in Blackboard.
8. Pilot the Indiwork online module for the whole PEUS cohort.

(b) Methodology adopted for evaluating impact on teaching and learning and reporting of findings

Various methods were deployed to elicit feedback from various stakeholders on the impact on teaching and learning. They were:

1. ELC PEUS teaching staff consultation, training and focus group interviews via interim and summative feedback

For the pilot conducted in Sem 1, AY14/15, 8 teachers with varying experience in Blackboard (BB), other eLearning sites and blended learning were trained on an ad hoc basis the Project Team to use Blackboard. As the group was small, it was easy to implement the formal workshops like navigating BB, uploading content materials, entering and releasing grades etc. Individual interviews informed the Project Leaders on the 8 teachers’ impression of BB. The responses were mixed, understandably so, as this was a move from Moodle to BB where the interface is different. Several teachers like the affordances that BB offered, in particular, the way it was structured that promoted autonomy for teachers in uploading their eLearning materials. Some felt that
the grade entry in BB was less cumbersome and distracting compared to Moodle. Others felt that the grade release was a little more inconvenient for them as they now had to do it for individual classes compared to the Moodle system where the Subject Leaders were the ones who released the grades to all the students.

2. ELC PEUS students focus group interviews and survey questionnaires

Through the Student Staff Consultative Meeting (SSCM) and the Mid-Semester Feedback, students from the 21 classes (taught by the 8 teachers) were asked about doing Indiwork using BB, submitting their digital story links and scripts to Turnitin. Other than stating that the workload for Indiwork was heavy, most were satisfied with using BB to do their Indiwork.

3. Reflections by the Project Leaders based on the feedback collected via the above channels

The feedback given from the pilot implementation informed the Project Leaders that more training has to be given to the teachers to prepare them to be more autonomous in the use of an LMS. Under the previous ELC system, only the Subject Leaders had access to the LMS. Thus, moving the teachers from a state of very restricted use of LMS to one where the teachers had almost complete freedom to do what he/she wanted, extra workshops (face-to-face or online) were deemed necessary and crucial.

4. Evaluation by the ELC eLearning Coordinator (internal) and EDC

The elearning coordinator convened meetings with the members in the elearning subcommittee to evaluate the success of the pilot implementation. All members felt that the outcome of this project would inform the other subjects of a general prototype (or template) that is needed. All felt that with such a move, more training workshops would benefit the teaching staff. These workshops were planned and more just-in-time training videos were also developed to meet this need for the new academic year 15/16 when all PEUS teachers used BB.

In Sem 1 AY15/16, BB was rolled out successfully for all the 24 teaching staff and 65 classes for PEUS. Interim feedback on an informal basis was collected with the staff via conversations, email and an end-of-semester meeting with staff. Most felt comfortable using BB and appreciated the just-in-time training videos that were sent to help them. Many of them also attended the lunch time workshops conducted by colleagues who are more familiar with BB. All in all, the teachers became more used to the idea that they are now managing their online BB site as they would for their students in the classroom. That realization spurred them to attend such workshops. Also, the teachers also mentioned that the just-in-time training videos to help them nearer the grade entry and release for assessments helped instill confidence in their use of BB.

(c) Implications of findings and recommendations for applying the deliverables

As this project started with a pilot for 21 classes in Sem 1 AY14/15 and scaled up to 65 classes in Sem 1 AY15/16, the implication is the scalability of the project in informing all ELC classes in future. As such, a three-fold recommendation was made upon consultations with the IT and eLearning coordinators. Firstly, continuous BB workshops will be conducted to familiarize teachers with BB as the LMS that ELC will adopt for most of its classes. Secondly, online training videos will be developed and a link for easy accessibility will be put in all the ELC BB sites for ease of retrieval and providing just-in-time help for teachers. Thirdly, a prototype, with proper documentation, that is ready for future implementation was developed by the Project Associate as a form of template for subjects that are still not BB ready. This is especially important for subject leaders whose subjects are not BB ready, as this documentation will help circumvent the complexities, especially setting up the Grade Center in Blackboard to meet individual subject component criteria, that these subject leaders may encounter.

Finally, the project has been selected for a possible EDC sharing session for all PolyU teachers because of the scalability outcome.