LearnHigher – a quantum leap for learning development?

Jackie Cawkwell
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Philip Roddis
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

> ... [the] LearnHigher ... [website] develops and collates peer reviewed resources in twenty learning areas that underpin activity across all academic subjects. By pooling expertise and sharing resources between institutions, LearnHigher aims to resolve problems of access and duplication across the sector. LearnHigher is also taking a strategic approach to build and disseminate a sound evidence base to inform learning development ...
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> **http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/aboutlearnhigher.htm**

> The referencing and plagiarism sections were especially helpful. The case study format is a great approach. The website is not complicated to use and the interactivity is good. The navigation for most people should be easy. All students should visit this site! **Sheffield Hallam University Student**.

Scope

In this brief review of LearnHigher's impressive site we confine ourselves to general comments on 'look' and 'feel', together with a few remarks on the extent to which the particular strengths of the web have been exploited. We end with a slightly more detailed appraisal of just one of the site's sixteen skills areas.

'Look'

The interface is visually attractive, using colour and simple repeating elements to establish a clear identity. The *For Students* main page, a single click from *Home*, is especially appealing. Its icon-links to the skills areas, from Academic Writing to Visual Practices, communicate effectively and look good. That matters: aesthetics

may determine whether a resource is accessed at all, and the *For Students* page, arguably the site's most important, would look better still without the redundant bullet points below the masthead - "take better notes" etc - as this would allow more icons to display without our having to scroll.

A more instrumental appraisal of visual factors might focus on what interface designers call *perceived affordance* – the degree to which 'look' conveys, to a first time user, functional cues. Here too the site does well, drawing the eye to key areas and resources. On the downside, some links, like *Contact LearnHigher* and *Editor's Login*, would be better removed from the navigation pane, or at least grouped more logically, using extra space to separate semantic categories. Similarly, *Latest News* deserves better than to be buried at foot of a *Home* page way too deep.

'Feel'

Notwithstanding the criticism just made, the navigation pane is well placed at the left of every page, clearly labelled, and in good working order. At the right of the *Home* page, a *Learning Area of the Month* ('Numeracy, Maths & Stats' in December 2008) inspired confidence in site maintenance. (That said, a visit in February 2009 found the 'monthly' topic unchanged!) Navigation from the dedicated pane, or by serendipitous use of embedded links, is simple, though again we found minor flaws. The *LearnHigher Spaces* page, for instance, displays logos for the partnering universities*.* Some are links, some aren't. Of more concern, though, are the many offsite links. While we are warned that their destinations "are not the responsibility of LearnHigher" (and most users are in any case backbutton-adept), we'd welcome less reliance on such links – risks of insularity seem low here, given LearnHigher's open forum ethos.

(Speaking of which, a LearnHigher aim as important as the resources themselves is to promote research and evidence-based enquiry. We welcome the *Research and Evaluation* pages, but making clear *how* colleagues may contribute would further that open forum ethos.)

We did not always feel competent to judge quality of content, especially in specialised areas like maths, but found considerable variation in the extent to which web strengths are exploited. Take the 'Workshop' on Differentiation (*Numeracy, Maths & Stats* section), whose presentation on a PDF several screens deep might reflect a view of the web as little more than an online document store. By contrast, the *Time Management* section*,* while not tapping the web's multimedia nature to the extent the *Group Work* section (considered below) does, is very effective in exploiting another key web attribute: the ease with which hypermedia allow users to control levels of detail. What could be more appropriate, when advising on time management, than to offer choices of 5 minute summary versus deeper exploration?

Skills Area: Group Work

In so short a review, we could choose only one skills area to examine in slightly more detail. Why this one? Group study experience, vital to employability, still sits uneasily with university practices (and student expectations) implicitly premised on individualist models of learning. HE is getting better at supporting group work but can still be vulnerable to charges of assessing untaught skills, asking students for qualities of assertiveness their assessors may themselves lack, and failing to devise discriminators sufficiently protective of individual effort and ability. With many otherwise sound study skills texts failing to do justice here, the Bradford University team responsible for this section has done student *and* tutor a great service.

The section centres on ten video episodes in which five students grapple with creating a presentation, and with the more challenging tasks of transcending individual differences to form an effective group. Leadership, decision making, conflict, (mis)understanding the task, and (mis)understanding others are a few of the issues raised as we follow the team's fortunes from forming and storming to norming and performing. (Initial responses by Sheffield Hallam University students suggest the characters, in true soap style, become psychologically 'real'.) Most episodes show a pair of four-minute clips – alternative takes that contrast 'Bad' and 'Better' approaches – while a few offer 'video diaries'; individual reflections on exchanges seen in the main clips. Certain elements repeat across all episodes: Scenario

Description, Observing Group Behaviour (discussion prompts) and Commentaries (on issues arising from the episode in question).

From long experience with student groups, we can vouch for the soundness of this section's content, and recommend it to all who care about the thorny issues raised by group study in HE. It applies findings from social psychology more effectively than is usual in this area, and sets new standards for web based study support in *any* area.

Verdict

The LearnHigher website, launched in October 2008, is a landmark in learning development. All stakeholders should use, promote, gather evidence and supply critical feedback on it. Ultimately it will be judged less on current quality of materials than on its capacity to foster and adapt to debate, to new findings, and to shifting HE realities – all criteria on which it is as yet simply too early to call.

Author details

Jackie Cawkwell is lead Education Adviser, and manages the Study Practice service, at SHU. She has worked with students since 1985, variously in research, management, learner development and guidance roles.

Philip Roddis, an Education Adviser and Study practice tutor at SHU, has taught communications, computing and social sciences in HE for over 20 years.