City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Research Paper:

What happens after the Big Bang… embedding an MLE into institutional cultures

Authors:

Dr Susannah Quinsee
Head of E-Learning/Associate Director of Library Information Services
City University
Northampton Square
London. EC1V 0HB

020 7040 0215
s.quinsee@city.ac.uk

Neal Sumner
E-Learning Consultant, E Learning Unit
City University
Northampton Square
London. EC1V 0HB

020 7040 3140
n.sumner@city.ac.uk

Conference strand:

Education and networked societies

What happens after the Big Bang… embedding an MLE into institutional cultures

In 2003, City University established an e-learning unit (ELU) and began to centralise its processes in order to create a managed learning environment (MLE). Six key lessons relating to the implementation of e-learning and the MLE were brought to light through a series of research interviews with key decision-makers at City.[1] Examining the strategic vision of influential figures in senior management in relation to City's overall commitment to improving its online business systems and particularly how e-learning connected with this vision provided valuable insight into the process of institutional change within the University. Whilst the establishment of the ELU and rollout of the MLE system could be regarded as instances of a revolutionary 'big bang' for the University; most of those engaged with the process viewed this as the beginning of a longer transitional period. Keeping momentum going by maintaining the enthusiasm of early adopters whilst convincing and engaging more sceptical staff was identified in the research as a key challenge. The over-arching message that came out of all the interviews carried out was that the e-learning process made senior decision makers reflect on their role within the institution and the role of the MLE in this cycle of change. However, does this still hold true two years on? Now that e-learning undoubtedly has a higher profile in the institution, has this positively promoted and supported the notion of an MLE? Is e-learning, supported via an MLE, seen as a core strategic initiative? What does MLE mean to senior stakeholders? And how does the experience at this University relate to the national agenda?

This paper revisits the situation at City University and asks those stakeholders whether the revolutionary promise envisaged by the 'big bang' of 2003 has been realised and questions how e-learning has changed the University. It also seeks to place the experiences of this institution in the wider national UK context by using data from the consultation on the JISC *Study on the Use of Environments to Support e-Learning in UK Further and Higher Education* (2005) study which provides a snapshot of institutional activity and future plans for MLE development.[2]

Over the past two years the uptake of e-learning at City has been rapid and wide-ranging. The e-learning initiative has attempted to cut across boundaries between academic and administrative activities and support areas. However, despite a high-level strategic commitment to e-learning and related support, City's 'e-readiness' has not always kept pace with the changing requirements of academic staff, for example with enrolments and assessments. One of the challenges has been to identify the business processes that need to be

---

[1] Quinsee, S and Sumner, N (2002) 'How to Manage the Big Bang … Evolution or Revolution in the Introduction of an MLE?, NLC 2002, www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2004/Proceedings/Individual_Papers/Quinsee_Sumner.htm (accessed 3rd October 2005). A later version of this paper was published in 2005 in the *Aslib Proceedings* vol 57 (2), pp 146-156.
[2] JISC (2005), Study on the Use of Environments to Support e-Learning in UK Further and Higher Education, www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/e-learning_survey_2005.pdf (accessed 3rd October 2005).

revised and streamlined in order to create an efficient managed learning environment. Whilst the e-learning initiative has been a success despite these hindrances, has this actually worked against a greater strategic investment in the commitment to developing an MLE?

The previous research (Quinsee and Sumner, 2002 and 2005) identified six key areas which needed to be understood in order to successfully implement an MLE. These are:

- Pedagogic direction - the impact of e-learning on existing and new modes of learning
- Operational connections and development
- Organisational structure and change – where to situate e-learning, who has responsibility?
- System process – technological constraints
- Professional development
- Strategic vision and perception

In this current research, each of these areas is revisited from two important perspectives. Firstly from an institutional perspective through interviews with a wider set of stakeholders. This illustrates the changing perceptions of the project over time as well as assessing the awareness of the implications of the MLE for the whole University. Secondly, from a national viewpoint, using the JISC study and with input from the Heads of e-Learning Forum (HeLF). By discussing City's experience in the context of this wider dataset a more comprehensive picture of MLE implementation and change management strategies can be gained. Particular attention is given to the organisational structures and processes in order to understand how dependent the impact of this kind of initiative is on organisational constructs.

Theory and methods.

The paper seeks to situate the implementation of a managed learning environment here at City University into a comparative context, primarily within the UK[3] although reference will be made more widely to Europe[4] and elsewhere[5]. This research focuses on elucidating the factors which governed the development of the MLE at City and how this relates to the realisation of the university's strategic vision for e-learning. It further seeks to identify what strategies have been successful in encouraging e-learning and MLE development beyond City by looking at the national framework.

The theoretical approach is based on action research, with empirical data collected from interviews with key stakeholders at City, including decision

---

[3] Foster, J, Bowskill, N, Lally, Vic and David McConnell (1999), *Preparing for Networked Collaborative Learning: An Institutional View*, Paper presented at the conference on Educational Research, Lahti, Finland, www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001335.htm (accessed 3rd October, 2005)

[4] Bonamy, J, Charlier, B and M Saunders (2002), *Learning Through Evaluation: Bridging Change in Higher Education: Case Studies from SOCRATES projects*, EES Seville conference http://www.europeanevaluation.org/docs/SAUNDERS.pdf (accessed 3rd October, 2005)

[5] Collis, Betty and Marjik van der Wende (2002), *Models of Technology and Change In Higher Education*, www.utwente.nl/cheps/documenten/ictrapport.pdf (accessed 3rd October, 2005)

makers, administrative and support services as well as academic staff. For a broader perspective, data will be collected from the Heads of e-Learning Forum in response to the JISC MLE landscape study. An analysis of the qualitative data collected through these processes forms the core of the primary research for the proposed paper. One aim is to produce a profile of City University, two years into the change management process and situate this against national trends.

This research asks to what extent there are shared meanings about the nature and purpose of an MLE, and the benefits, presumed or realised, of choosing an MLE as the vehicle for delivering the strategic goals of an institution. Reference is made to various models for institutional change such as those elaborated by Fullan[6] and the typology discussed in the paper by Adrianna Kezar[7].The experience of City University, as revealed through the interviews, is evaluated in the context of these models .

In conclusion this paper provides an institutional context to the JISC MLE landscape study whilst simultaneously gaining the invaluable viewpoint of those stakeholders involved in implementing change from within institutions across the UK. It aims to identify how MLE development is progressing in the UK and how this will impact on individual institutions.

---

[6] Fullen, Michael (2001), *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Columbia: Teachers College Press)
[7] Kezar, Adrianna (2001), Understanding and Facilitating Change in Higher Education in the 21st century, www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed457763.html (accessed 3rd October, 2005)