



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Quinsee, S. & Bullimore, A. (2011). Creating the strategic learning environment at City University London. *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, 28(4), pp. 275-288. doi: 10.1108/10650741111162743

This is the unspecified version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/575/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1108/10650741111162743>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk

Creating the Strategic Learning Environment at City University London

Professor Susannah Quinsee and Anise Bullimore

s.quinsee@city.ac.uk and anise@city.ac.uk

City University London

Northampton Square

London. EC1V 0HB

UK

Professor Susannah Quinsee

Professor Susannah Quinsee is Director of Learning Development and Chair in Learning and Teaching Development at City University London. She leads the Learning Development Centre (LDC) which encompasses educational development and technology enhanced learning activity for the University. The LDC is a central service, academic department and a research active centre. Previously Susannah was Head of E-Learning and Associate Director of Information Services and Libraries also at City University London. In this role she managed the implementation of e-learning at the University. She was Chair of the Heads of E-Learning Forum (HeLF) Steering Group from 2007-2011 and as a founder member of HeLF still remains on the HeLF Steering Group. Susannah has worked as a lecturer and in academic support roles at a number of other higher education institutions in the UK. Susannah has considerable experience in the areas of online learning, student support, implementing learning and teaching strategies and project management in relation to higher education. Susannah's current research focuses on leadership and change management in relation to learning development, developing communities of practice in higher education and engaging staff in new learning and teaching methodologies, particularly using technology.

Anise Bullimore

Anise Bullimore is a Learning Development Consultant at City University London. Anise previously worked with Learndirect at the City Literary Institute and has a background in libraries. Anise has an MA in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies from Warwick University and an MSc in Information Science from City University. Anise's role involves promoting and supporting the use of learning technologies across the institution with particular expertise in the areas of change management, evaluation, induction, staff development and accessibility.

Abstract

Purpose: This paper describes the creation of a new approach to the implementation of educational technologies at a UK Higher Education Institution. Driven by changes in technology, an evaluation of the virtual learning environment (VLE) provided the opportunity to reassess the application of technology to the curriculum. However, such an evaluation and subsequent implementation is not about technology but a social process of negotiation and stakeholder engagement. The narrative of the evaluation is explored to offer lessons to other institutions.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper takes a story telling approach as this enables greater emotional engagement with the reader as well as the description of the social and organisational aspects of such a VLE evaluation. This approach enables the difficulty of change in complex organisations, such as a University, to be addressed more fully.

Findings: Key lessons from the evaluation of the VLE and resulting creation of the strategic learning environment (SLE) are drawn which can be of use to other institutions. The main finding is the fact that such evaluations and implementation of educational technologies are not about technical factors but about opportunities and threats presented by such technologies to the educational experience. These findings also inform future development of the SLE at the institution.

Originality/value: This paper will be of interest to institutions that are undertaking evaluation exercises of their educational technology provision as well as those that are implementing new technologies or considering large scale organisational change.

Keywords: VLE, technology enhanced learning, organisational change

Paper type: Case study

Introduction

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have been growing in use in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over the last ten years. One could argue that they have become ubiquitous (Weller, 2007). In the UK, institutions started to invest in VLEs as a coherent way of presenting content to students and supplementing the face-to-face experience. It is uncommon now for a UK University not to have an institutional VLE (Browne *et al*, 2010). However, VLEs have often received a negative reception as technology has changed and developed. They have been seen as “glorified filing cabinets” (Ellis, 2008) that do not really herald the implementation of a new kind of technology enhanced pedagogy, but instead merely give students access to PowerPoint slides. The advent of social media, defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” has also placed new pressures on VLEs. As monolithic, locked down systems supported institutionally (Stiles, 2007), VLEs are not necessarily responsive to changing demands of learners or opportunities presented by technology. The rise of tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and so on present new educational models, but are these incompatible with VLEs? Furthermore, disquiet has arisen around the cost of VLEs, particularly when social media tools are “free” and the dominance of Blackboard in the marketplace has caused concern. When HEIs are

facing financial pressure, coupled with increasing student expectations, can they afford to rely on outdated technology that may not meet their needs?

This situation, with changing technology coupled with an unsatisfactory reliance upon VLEs to deliver content, has been exacerbated by the turbulent political and financial climate in the UK, with the result that a number of institutions are evaluating their VLEs and educational technology provision. In 2009, over 30 UK HEIs were in the process of evaluating or about to evaluate their VLE (HeLF, 2009). This paper outlines the story of the creation of the strategic learning environment (SLE) at City University London in response to these drivers outlined above, specifically the affordances offered by new technologies to transform education. It looks at the rationale for why our approach to the implementation of educational technologies changed to a more integrated, flexible structure with an open source VLE (Moodle) at the core. The paper uses a narrative structure to describe the events and triggers behind those events, analyses what actually occurred and considers some lessons learnt for institutions following a similar path.

Method

Evaluating technological implementations on an institutional scale is more than a technical user requirements gathering exercise (Oliver, 2000). It is a complex social process that demands sensitive stakeholder engagement and flexibility in terms of planning. To demonstrate these complexities, this paper takes a narrative structure and examines the creation of the SLE through a storytelling technique. Stories create a more compelling association with the reader and therefore this approach can enable the lessons to have greater resonance for other institutions (Morgan and Dennehy, 1997).

Conventional narratives or stories can be divided into distinct stages or the 'eight point story arc' (Watts, 2006). These eight stages are:

- Stasis
- Trigger
- The quest
- Surprise
- Critical choice
- Climax
- Reversal (Watts, 2006)

This approach maps easily onto the story of the creation of the SLE. Those storytelling elements are marked in *italics* to differentiate them from the analysis. Outlining the implementation of an institutional system can be rather limited in scope which does not allow for the emotional upheaval and tempestuous experiences of those involved. By evoking a structured narrative to this story we are able to describe more graphically those events that influenced our thinking, explain the rationale for the decisions we made and provide a more memorable description of our experiences as well as providing some lessons learnt which will be of use for others.

Statis: Cityspace and the 8 Strategic Technologies

Once upon a time there was a University. And this University had been using a VLE, CitySpace, for around five years.

Although City had not been a particularly early adopter of VLEs, once it had adopted them it had moved ahead relatively quickly and successfully. We were one of the first institutions to use the Blackboard Vista software, which we called Cityspace, and our approach had been a source of interest to other institutions as we had a reputation for trying things early and working differently. As well as using the VLE, the University had seen the arrival of eight other “strategic” (i.e. institutionally wide supported) technologies. These included audio and video conferencing, virtual classroom facilities, plagiarism detection and an e-portfolio system. However, despite the good provision within the institution, disquiet was occurring amongst the staff. Cityspace was regarded as unattractive, “clunky” and difficult to use. Many of those “early adopter” staff had suffered from tools not working and developed significant distrust in the system. There was a common perception that Cityspace was unreliable. Although CitySpace had tools that could do some sophisticated things, most staff used the system as a glorified content repository for their lecture notes. It was argued that this usage was because CitySpace was so difficult to use that it was almost impossible to engender more engaging uses. Furthermore, whilst the set of strategic technologies were working nicely in isolation, there was no real vision behind their integration and support. *Often heralded as knights on white chargers, arriving in the University to fix a particular problem*, these eight technologies had sporadic use across the institution.

An added element of disquiet came from the changing world of technology beyond the University. Staff were beginning to dabble in web 2.0 technologies and social media, as well as starting to have a greater appreciation of how technology could enhance learning, which was not necessarily mirrored in the tools available within the University. The University is not unique in these problems of diffuse innovation and new technologies overtaking institutionally supported ones. As observed above, the numbers of institutions evaluating their provision demonstrates that this is a clear movement for change in the sector.

Something needed to change. And fast.... And that change surprisingly happened from an unexpected quarter.

Trigger: the End is Nigh

Although the disquiet was growing, initially, there was little appetite for wholesale change, until it was discovered in 2008 that the Vista software was being discontinued. Vista would continue to be supported for a few more years but development would be minimal. Only by migrating to a new system could the VLE be developed. At first, many staff in the University did not take this news seriously: “surely we could not be left with an unsupported system?” was one response; another was, “why worry now, we have years before we need to change?”. *However, a few valiant staff members consulted the oracle and did the maths.....* They worked out that licenses needed renewal in two years’ time; that renewal would involve moving to the new system. If the migration was such a large-scale activity, then surely it would be worth hosting a full scale evaluation of not just the VLE but all the strategic technologies? Thus, the SLE Evaluation (SLEE) was born.

The Quest: Do we need a VLE?

We were facing an unavoidable change. Some staff expressed their discontent about VLEs as monoliths and not fit for purpose (Stiles, 2007), although others could see the advantages in VLEs such as those outlined by Clay (2011), however the main thrust for the SLEE was twofold: the

discontinuation of Vista and a desire to re-excite staff about the *brave new world of e-learning*. The University had significant recent history of change. Since the implementation of Cityspace in 2003, three Vice Chancellors had come and gone, organisational structures had been changed and many staff had left. There was a concern that these changes had led to educational innovations being rather “patchy”. Part of this was down to process. Cityspace had been brought in as a Trojan Horse, unexpectedly heralding change of institutional processes around student data, systems integration and assessment. However, because it was a Trojan Horse not all processes had been fully developed to take into account the demands of institution-wide e-learning. Vast improvements had been made in the accuracy of student data but certain processes, such as curriculum design and programme approval had not fully embraced the possibilities presented by educational technologies. From the educational technologists and experts there was a desire for process change, flexibility and ownership of educational technologies. This could be realised by the creation of a longer term vision and roadmap for the application of new educational technologies at the institution.

In terms of Kotter’s (1996) model of change, the fact that Vista was being discontinued created a sense of urgency which enabled staff to focus clearly on what needed to be done. Crucial to the SLEE was timing:

- Whatever decisions we made needed to be evident through initial implementations in September 2009
- Full implementation and decommissioning of CitySpace needed to be achieved by September 2011

Although the realisation for the SLEE came from a one page paper that was approved by University senior management in April 2008, the main evaluation activity did not start until September 2008. It may seem incongruous that such a potentially transformative activity was initiated by a short document, but the key fact was to engage senior management in terms of high level support in principle of the evaluation rather than the details of the process. Such endorsement at a senior level was critical in giving a mandate to the SLEE but also engendering trust in the team to carry out the detailed evaluation work.

Most of the evaluation activity had to occur in six months in order to meet University planning deadlines in April 2009 for a September 2009 implementation. Whilst some staff argued this was too hasty, there was recognition that this timescale enabled the institution to be proactive rather than be at the mercy of the software suppliers. From September to December 2008 a series of workshops, focus groups, surveys and consultations were held with staff and students. The activity was overseen by a Steering Group, chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education). At first the workshops were cathartic; staff shared their frustrations with Cityspace. Quickly, however, they moved onto more aspirational explorations of what staff wanted to do in terms of using technology to support educational delivery. Our initial evaluation was shaped, sometimes controversially, by the question “do we need a VLE?” and the resounding answer was, “yes ... but...” The problem was that no-one really knew what the “but” was. Our evaluation became of interest to the wider HE community as we presented a conferences and network events on our experiences. We were one of the first Universities using Vista to evaluate an enterprise level VLE and this aroused significant interest.

The procurement process was also key to setting a time imperative for the evaluation. We used competitive dialogue to manage the tender which enabled frequent engagement with suppliers (OJEC, 2006) as well as the publication of a set of very high level requirements in December 2008. This was beneficial as it enabled us to formulate a solution without completing all the evaluation activities internally.

The Surprise: Drop the “e”

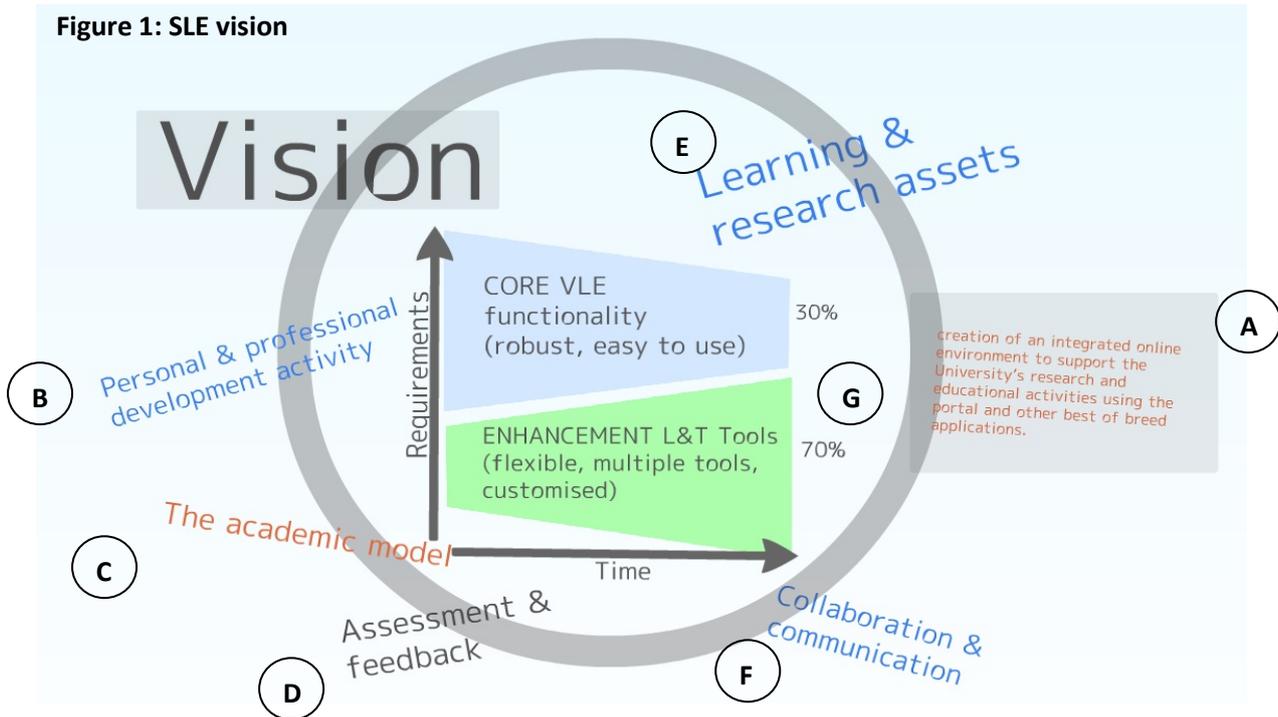
By early 2009 we had issued an intention to tender and invited suppliers into the institution. We had a greater understanding in some parts of the organisation as to how technology could support learning, but this was not widespread. We had purchased a portal, but usage of this was not defined. We knew we needed much greater integration between systems and we also knew that students and staff demanded more flexible learning. But what did this look like?

In February 2009, a mini-crisis point was reached when members of the Steering Group realised that whilst we had been gathering a significant amount of data we needed to take an objective view on how we could use this information. A roundtable was organised involving the key players: Associate Deans Education, educational technologists, CIO and Information Architect and key strategic thinkers from other support services. Before the meeting - *what now can be seen as the Holy Grail* – a paper outlining different options for the future of educational technology at City: *the magnificent seven* was circulated. These “solution models” ranged from the “do nothing” option to implementing a replacement VLE to creating a fully personalised learning environment. They were significant in enabling us to see the full range of options available and consider in full the implications of each one. In the round table we debated which model would enable us to realise our desire for flexibility, working in partnership with suppliers and embracing future technologies. The result was the vision for the SLE, in figure 1.

The SLE vision is the creation of an integrated learning environment combining virtual and physical space to support the University’s research and educational activities, as outlined by A. At the heart sits the VLE, but enhanced by a plug and play approach to integrating additional tools. Sections B-F denote those activities and tools encompassed by the SLE vision. For example, B includes e-portfolio, career planning capabilities as well as aspects of curriculum design to facilitate this; D, those activities and tools relating to the delivery of high quality assessment and feedback, including policies required to support this, for example around submission of coursework online. The middle section, G, demonstrates how over a five year period we will move from primary reliance on a VLE for most of our educational technology needs, to reliance on the VLE for a core set of functionality, but greater application of other tools, whether third party or institutionally supported. The percentages are indicative but designed to demonstrate the shift in our thinking and use of tools;

moving from that “monolithic” VLE to a more flexible, integrated structure.

Figure 1: SLE vision



This vision articulated current practice at the time but was aspirational in describing our future direction. It was not about technology but about how technology can be applied to the core educational activities of the institution. Although some of these activities happen within the existing VLE technology, what we wanted to do was to encourage staff to rethink their educational philosophy and pedagogic methods. Key principles that underpinned the vision were flexibility and partnership. The technology is merely a driver of change, but it enables more flexible learning. All these methods enhance the learning experience of students by complementing the face-to-face interactions they have with staff.

What was surprising was how quickly we agreed this common vision (in under two hours) and how it refocused the evaluation. The reason for the consensus was down to the months of preparation and discussion we had had previously. Although we had not fully articulated our thinking, we had all been working towards a common purpose. The SLE model informed discussions with suppliers and the articulation of requirements in the tender document.

Critical Choice: Does the Technology Exist for the SLE?

After we had met with all the suppliers, the tender was formulated. However, it became apparent that the solution that met our vision did not fully exist and an OpenSource solution, using Moodle, was required. Although we had considered OpenSource, we did not think that the institution had the expertise for it. Traditionally, the University had chosen to implement proprietary systems and there was something to be said for sharing the risk externally. There was also concern that OpenSource had considerable unanticipated financial costs (Donoghue, 2005). However, as we defined more closely what we wanted the objections to OpenSource diminished because the advantages became apparent. Our values of working in partnership and flexibility could only be realised through OpenSource. As the tender evaluation drew to a close, Moodle embedded within

our portal and collaboration tools infrastructure, became the clear choice. By moving to Moodle, we could ensure that we retained flexibility over development; we could truly work in partnership with the supplier – as the supplier would be ourselves and we would be able to create a much more integrated system. By embedding with the portal we could create seamless access, integrate new social media tools and design the plug and play environment we needed. The decision to go to Moodle as the core of the SLE was a major one. It succeed in reigniting staff enthusiasm for educational technologies as staff felt their concerns had been listened to and they were excited about the possibilities offered by Moodle.

Whatever system we chose we knew that the creation of the SLE would require a considerable amount of resources, thus senior management needed to be fully engaged in the process. The approved business case for the SLE was unique in that it did not only propose one off project costs but also a significant investment in associated staff costs which would be paid for centrally but devolved to Schools. Furthermore by tying this initiative in with our portal we were able to demonstrate significant cost savings, but only if both projects were funded together. All these ideas cut across usual University assumptions about how projects work. Ensuring senior level buy-in enabled us to negotiate the University authorisation procedures much more effectively as senior staff understood what we were trying to do, saw a need for it and believed we could do it. From the outset senior management were briefed via different means; whether through committee papers or informal briefings. Presentations on the status of the SLE were held regularly and Deans were asked to nominate those staff that could act on their behalf as part of the Steering Group. This led to a sense of trust in the initiative as all Schools and central areas felt their voice was heard and requirements met. Senior management had a number of different ways of getting information and were reassured that real consultation was occurring. Demonstrating that this initiative was not about technology but was an enabler for educational change resonated for the senior management team who were then more inclined to promote the project publicly as the benefits were far reaching. Two of the Deputy Vice Chancellors presented on the opportunities afforded by the SLE to a Heads of Department meeting, outlining how the initiative was about change not about technology. This was a fantastic endorsement. Throughout the team did not take any stakeholder engagement for granted and constantly worked to ensure staff, particularly senior staff, were informed and engaged. Building up trust across the institution in the process and giving staff multiple opportunities for engagement whether via workshops, surveys or supplier meetings led to an inclusive process that built consensus. This reassured senior management that our decision was one that truly represented the needs of the institution.

Off with the Plan – a Bit More Questing

So this section is not following the traditional “narrative” structure, but not all stories are the same. The decision to go with Moodle is only part of the story, what happened next was even more important.

Once we had a vision, a decision and appropriate resources we rapidly moved to engage staff in the creation of a series of initial implementations. The phrase “initial implementations” was used deliberately and was part of series of terminology changes we made to demonstrate the values of the implementation. It was very important that we did not view the early adopters of the VLE as pilots as this implied that if the implementations were unsuccessful then the rollout of Moodle

would not continue. In reality, we could not do that, so we called those early adopters “initial implementations”. We also did not refer to the implementation as a “project” instead we talked about it as an “initiative” – the reason for this being that “project” implies a short term process whereby we believed that our SLE vision was a much longer and transformative process. A further word we did not use was “migration”. If we talked about migration we set the expectation that Cityspace would be replicated in the new SLE. Even if this was technically possible, which it was not, we decided that we needed a new approach to course design. We wanted to set the expectation that rather than merely moving one VLE and replacing it with another we were “redesigning for delivery”. Therefore, rather than talking about migration of modules, we talked about redesigning them in the new system. This shared language has been very important for the initiative and helped create a sense of common purpose and agreement.

Interestingly, once the decision had been made, *the next part of the story was one of the hardest parts*. Removing one VLE in favour of a new approach is much more difficult than implementing one from nothing as there are high expectations and reliance upon the current system. Involving staff in the evaluation and asking them in theory to sign up to the new approach was easier than asking them to actually implement it. Many of the Schools who had large usage of the current VLE were very reluctant to be one of the initial implementations of the new one. Therefore, those areas that had initial implementations tended to be those with less e-learning experience. This caused issues as they needed more support as well as having, on occasion, unrealistic expectations of what could be provided. We also needed the academics engaging with these initial implementations to be advocates for the system in general, which is they were new to this field was not always possible.

A critical decision as to how to increase adoption came when the Steering Group, frustrated with the slow pace of change, adopted the approach of devolved responsibility for the implementation (Bregman, 2007). Originally much time had been spent debating how we should move modules to the new SLE, whether it should be academic year groups or programmes or Schools. This all denoted strong central control of the initiative, however, we quickly realised that any attempt at this level of control was futile. City is a devolved institution with autonomous School structures. Schools resist central control and would rather work in partnership with central initiatives to implement them dependent upon individual School requirements. Partnership, is a core value of the SLE initiative. At the time the University was undergoing various changes in senior management and this also negated against strong central management of change. The SLE had been successful in negotiating School-based resources and this meant we had structures in Schools that could support the change. In order to build on the culture of trust we had created for the evaluation we needed to continue this through to the implementation by giving ownership of the pace of change to the Schools. Therefore, the Steering Group, contrary to most projects at the University, delegated the responsibility for delivering the changes to Schools and therefore ownership to the academic and support staff “on the front line” rather than by a team divorced from the realities of using the SLE day-to-day. Technical and infrastructure responsibility was owned by Information Services (IS), development and communication by the Learning Development Centre (LDC). Governance is by a partnership model, taken from the success of the collaboration between services and School areas during the initial evaluation phase. We did not, therefore, insist that all modules of a certain level or type be moved to the new SLE at a centrally determined point. Instead, we let Schools determine when would be the most appropriate time for them to move modules across. There was one non-negotiable parameter: CitySpace will be decommissioned in September 2011.

By demonstrating trust and confidence in the Schools to manage the implementation in a way that suited them greater buy-in was achieved as well as ensuring that resources were devoted to implementation and adoption, rather than administrative project management processes. Responsibility lay with those who were accountable for delivery and who own the modules, rather than centrally. This may be counter to many institutional that cultures but it is an approach that we would strongly advocate.

A further difficulty came in relation to the software itself. As part of the SLEE we had a list of dealbreakers in terms of functionality needed to be available in Moodle from September 2009. This was mainly based on replicating CitySpace functionality in Moodle, however this became problematic. There was disagreement as to the scope of each of the functions and whether or not these were actually dealbreakers or could have workarounds. It soon became apparent that any attempt to replicate CitySpace as it was was misguided as it did not allow for the redesign for delivery approach. The issue of functionality, what was available or what could be available, was a microcosm of the cultural shift inherent in moving from a proprietary to OpenSource VLE. Disagreements arose not due to technical reasons but because of emotional attachment to specific tools and fear of change. Through this exercise we learnt a lot about the difficulty of articulating precise requirements and how these changed between those during the evaluation which were theoretical and how that requirement manifested itself when put into practice in the new system.

By spring 2010, many of the fears in Moodle's reliability and functionality had been overcome and the approach of devolved responsibility was resulting in more rapid take-up. It looked as if the difficulties faced after the resulting decision were being overcome and that the initiative was back on track. *But there was one other huge test to come.*

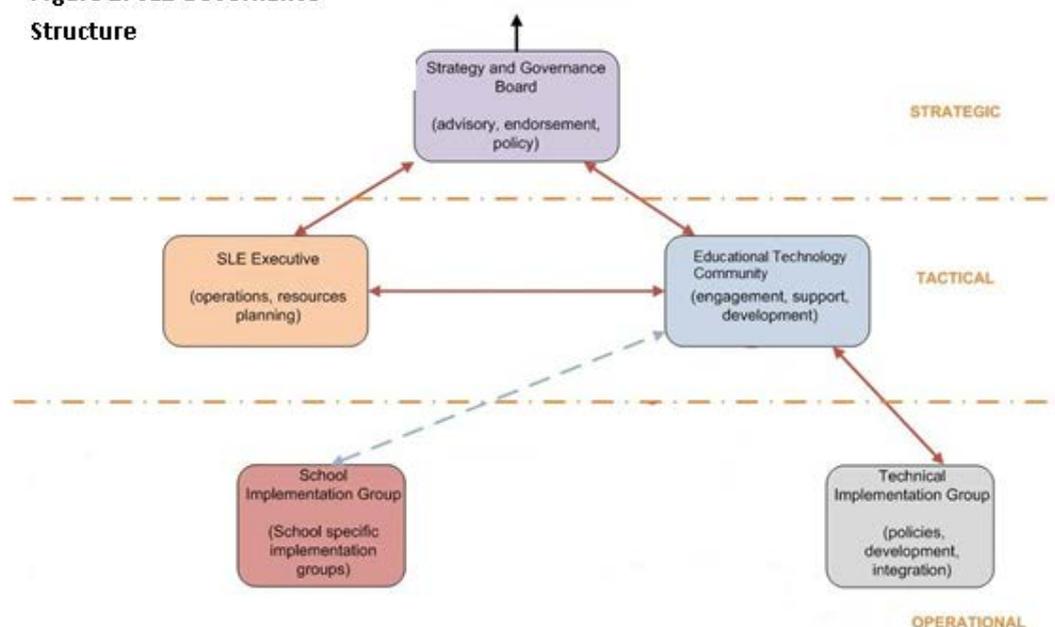
Climax – A Closed Door

During the 2009-2010 academic year the University was changing its website, introducing a portal and implementing the SLE. The associated risks with such large scale institutional and technical change had attempted to be mitigated via governance structures and close working relationships with the portal team. However, the portal relied heavily on the new website in terms of design and infrastructure and initially it was felt that the SLE should pick up the same common design. Such close interdependency between three independent projects was problematic and the SLE was decoupled in terms of design from the portal and website. However, then the portal ran into problems. There was concern about the associated collaboration tools and how they could be used with the SLE as many of them performed similar functions. Moodle was going to be one of the cornerstones of the portal identity yet staff were keen to use Moodle but not to use the portal. It was also not clear what services would be delivered via the portal. The decision was made to rollout Moodle independently of the portal as no other services were ready to be delivered at that time. Did this leave the SLE vision obsolete as were we now just replacing one VLE with another?

Reversal – Moodle alone

The decision to release Moodle alone was a difficult one and could have divided the consensus between Schools and service areas, particular IS who were leading on the portal. However, by effective utilisation of the governance structure, in figure 2, full commitment from all stakeholders in these decisions was ensured.

Figure 2: SLE Governance Structure



Project governance has been an area of continual revision throughout the SLE initiative. Currently, the flat structure with devolved reporting operates a stewardship model based on the principles of accountability, decision making and communication.

The SLE Executive was made up of IS and LDC representatives and designed to monitor and oversee resourcing. In contrast the Educational Technologists Community (ETC) was a form of user group, with representatives from all Schools focusing on engagement, change management and requirements. This group was designed to create a common focus and purpose, thus the term “community” was deliberate. Strategy and Governance Board was a high level steering group and project board setting the tone for the project and agreeing principles. Chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor it enabled senior management to keep apprised of progress.

Without the portal, the SLE initiative regrouped with a renewed focus. We realised the importance of keeping things simple and had overstretched the initiative by trying to connect it to too many other projects over which we did not have enough influence. This decision gave motivation to rethink what we were trying to achieve with the SLE as well as giving people confidence that the initiative could overcome setbacks and still deliver.

Resolution – Mapping the Yellow Brick Road

Although work had been planned on articulating a roadmap, due to the issues outlined above this had not been realised as the focus had been on technical infrastructure and the connections with other projects. Roadmapping now became vital as the team realised that if we wished to remain true to the SLE vision then we needed to focus on the educational impact of what we were doing. Clearly defining the pedagogic benefits of the SLE was crucial as well as demonstrating how a new approach to technology enhanced learning could improve the learner experience. There was also a need to

incentivise uptake of the SLE and celebrate what we had achieved, rather than focusing on the problems.

Once the September 2010 implementation had succeeded, the ETC revisited the vision with a greater understanding of the capabilities of Moodle for integration and tangible realisations of the benefits of the SLE in the way that certain modules were utilising the plug and play approach. A roadmap was created which revised the SLE vision and focused on core pedagogic areas:

1. Assessment and feedback
2. Collaboration and communication
3. Learning and research assets
4. Learning environment
5. Curriculum design (including PDP)

These areas were linked to institutional performance measures and National Student Survey scores to gauge more effectively the impact of the SLE. Projects were funded to demonstrate achievement and foster innovation as well as awards created for staff making full use of the SLE. The five themes were underpinned by two enabling strands of activity – professional development for staff supported by the LDC and infrastructure and development, the responsibility of IS. What the SLE vision has succeeded in achieving is a cultural shift in the institution around educational technologies and their correlation to the improvement of student learning. We have a stronger foundation upon which we can develop change.

Although it may not be “and they lived happily ever after”, the ending is at least “and they were hopeful that at some point they would all live happily ever after”.

Conclusion: Things We Wish We had Known Then....

The SLE initiative is not complete but there are some key lessons which other institutions embarking upon a similar path or those already in the process of evaluating their VLE will find useful.

1. Keep it simple: As we learnt, trying to connect the SLE with too many other initiatives caused problems for the organisation. By refocusing on the SLE alone we were able to retain a simple message that was easier to understand and communicate.
2. Trust instinct: We frequently had to adjust our plans and change direction. Relying on a detailed project plan alone does not ensure the success of your project. Instead, communicating well, listening to others and readjusting your work accordingly, as we did in terms of our approach to devolved responsibility, are much greater indicators for success.
3. Right personnel: Identifying the “right” personnel can be hard. By enlisting the Deans to select staff they trusted to work with us meant that we had the “right” people from each School for communication and buy-in. It also enabled us to engage different staff in the process. You need to understand how your organisation works and select those people who can influence and promote the initiative. They may not always agree with you but those disagreements can be crucial in ensuring that the project actually represents what is happening within the organisation.

4. Delegate and devolve: Give the ownership and responsibility to those who can truly own it. Avoid the temptation to be overly controlling but instead demonstrate trust in others. By devolving ownership we were able to ensure collective responsibility and shared interests in reaching our achieved outcomes. This made for much deeper and greater engagement with the initiative. It also inspired better working relationships with the Schools and benefits that we had not initially realised, such as new communities of educational technologists working across Schools. Trust is vital for a complex initiative such as this and delegating implementation to those on the ground demonstrates trust and inspires respect.
5. Plan but flexibly: Relating to the first point, if you have a simple objective your plans can be more flexible and meet the changing organisational landscape. Universities are complex organisations and over the course of a long initiative such as this one the landscape will change. Therefore, to succeed you need to ascertain what is the only parameter that is immovable and what can be changed. For example, there may be changes in funding or personnel or senior management all of which could impact on your evaluation. Furthermore, as you implement you will change the organisation and landscape so you need to be prepared for this.
6. The ideal product does not exist, but how you use it is important. Or in other words, it is not about the technology but what you do with it. It is very easy to get drawn into detailed technical specifications, as we did with our dealbreakers, yet the reality of implementing a new suite of tools raises new opportunities that could not have been articulated in earlier requirements. Instead, focus on the educational opportunities offered by the tools and what staff want to do in their teaching. This gives you greater flexibility and ensures your initiative is led by educational demand not by technical specifications.
7. It is much more difficult to do this a second time around than when you are implementing from nothing. When replacing and evaluating a VLE expectations are much higher. Experiences have shaped user expectations and fear of change is paramount. Removing an old system, regardless of its popularity, is a sensitive process because people have come to rely on that old system. Also you have to deal with issues of running two (or more) systems in parallel and closing the legacy system. This makes it a much more complex process than implementing from nothing and you need to instil trust and confidence at an early stage. Our initial implementations enabled us to do this by demonstrating that the system could work.
8. Most of your time will be spent doing work that is not in the plan, but is more important: For example the informal “coffee” conversations to engage staff, firefighting as problems arise, reassuring people, convincing, communicating and negotiating. Our experiences have taught us that you can never take engagement for granted and if you do, your initiative could suffer. We have spent significant time understanding the politics of our organisation, listening to concerns and working to ensure staff are engaged. These activities are difficult to quantify but are vital to ensure the initiative remains on track. Examples include meeting with Steering Group members to brief them on major decisions before full meetings; dealing with problems rapidly that may seem insignificant to the central team but are vital for

School buy-in and constantly meeting with staff to give opportunities for them to understand the project.

None of these lessons are about technology *per se* but about instigating change in complex organisations and understanding the importance of engaging with networks on a social basis to enact meaningful change.

References

boyd, d. and Ellison, N. (2007), 'Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13 No. 1, available at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html> (accessed 28th April 2011).

Bregman, P. (2007), *A Short Guide to Leading a Big Change*. Space for Change, New York, NY.

Browne, T., Hewitt, R., Jenkins, M., Voce, J., Walker, R. and Yip, H. (2010) *UCISA: Technology enhanced learning survey*, available http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/en/publications/tel_survey2010.aspx (accessed 28th April 2011).

Clay, J. (2011), 'Using the VLE more', *e-learning Stuff*, available at <http://elearningstuff.net/2011/02/03/using-the-vle-more/> (accessed 28th April 2011).

Donoghue, A. (2005), 'Open source 'is free like a puppy is free' says Sun boss', *ZDNet*, available at <http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/application-development/2005/06/08/open-source-is-free-like-a-puppy-is-free-says-sun-boss-39202713/> (accessed 28th April 2011).

Ellis, C. (2008), 'You can't do that in a classroom!': How Distributed Learning can Assist in the Widespread Adoption of Hybrid Learning Strategies', in *Hybrid Learning and Education First International Conference 2008 Proceedings of the international conference in Hong Kong, China, 2008*, available at http://www.cs.cityu.edu.hk/~ichl2008/LNCS-Proceedings/ICHL2008_Keynote_CathEllis_17pages.pdf (accessed 28th April 2011).

Hale, A. (2011), 'How to Structure A Story: The Eight-Point Arc'. *Daily Writing Tips*, available <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/how-to-structure-a-story-the-eight-point-arc/> (accessed 28th April 2011)

Kotter, J. (1996), *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Morgan, S. and Dennehy, R. (1997), 'The power of organizational storytelling: a management development perspective', *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 16 No. 7, pp. 494-501.

OGC (2006) *Competitive Dialogue Procedure*, available at http://www.ogc.gov.uk/documents/guide_competitive_dialogue.pdf (accessed 28th April 2011).

Oliver, M. (2000), 'An introduction to the Evaluation of Learning Technology', *Educational Technology & Society*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp.20-30.

Stiles, M. (2007), 'Death of the VLE – a challenge to a new orthodoxy', *Serials*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp .31-36, available at <http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=article&issn=0953> (accessed 28th April 2011).

Watts, N. (2006), *Writing a Novel*, 3rd edition. Teach Yourself Books, London.

Weller, M. (2007), *Virtual Learning Environments: Using, Choosing and Developing Your VLE*. Routledge, Oxon.