

Implementing a VLE at the Belfast Institute of F&HE: Changing the Culture

Key Words

Technological Change, Teaching Practices, Project management

Change messages

- If change is appropriately triggered, it can lead to a bottom-up demand for change which will require adequate resourcing.
- Flexibility and responsiveness from senior management is required if the enthusiasm generated is to be sustained and corporate targets met.

Overview

The Belfast Institute is a very large organisation, offering a breadth and depth of curriculum provision. This presents an enormous challenge in facilitating any change management strategy. This is certainly the case in the context of the Institute's targets to provide greater curriculum flexibility and establishing new ways of widening participation and access.

The medium of e-learning, using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), was chosen to meet these targets. This was articulated in 2001 by setting the target of enabling on-line access to a minimum of 50% of the Institute's courses by 2004.

Central to this daunting and exciting task was the realisation that not only would the skill base of 1000 teaching staff have to be considerably 'up-scaled' over a relatively short period of time but also we would have to manage a culture change - from employing traditional methods of teaching to using e-learning strategies. The latter challenge cannot be understated.

Influences

The Institute had invested heavily in IT infrastructure as a result of government initiatives and coupled with organisational commitment to widen access, we aimed to set a vision that we hoped would get staff excited about using a VLE to facilitate learning. So, in 2001/02, we set the following targets to help embed learning technology:

- Widen learner participation through greater curriculum flexibility.
- Enable on-line access to a minimum of 50% of Institute's courses by 2004.
- Raise the IT skill base of staff to facilitate achievement of targets.
- Embed e-learning & learning technology methodologies.

Decision-making

We anticipated resistance from cohorts of staff generally due to:

- technophobia;
- the threat that using learning technologies would reduce their teaching hours; and
- the time to develop their skills and understanding of the new technologies.

The Staff Development service opted to employ the following strategy, supported by Executive Management, with the specific purpose to avoid a big bang introduction or fanfare launches – to

reduce the prospect of a perceived threat. Thus, it was an organic process aimed at building up and creating demand rather than downward imposition by senior management.

The following were key elements of the change strategy adopted.

- **Foster & Mainstream Ownership:** involve credible staff, i.e. those held in esteem by colleagues, from each department in the use of the VLE, as well as guiding possible training to support usage.
- **Organise & Support Training:** for key potential users.
- **Deliver Staff development through the VLE:** This illustrated the impact our strategy has had on cultivating confidence among teaching staff in using information and learning technology to assist their own learning. This also encouraged some staff to overcome any reluctance to using on-line learning.
- **Accredit Training:** We felt we needed to go beyond generic, general programmes and develop a programme that met our corporate targets and build on our success with actually using a VLE.
- **Mainstream ownership at departmental level.** Encourage each academic department to develop at least two courses using the VLE (16 courses in total) and formalise the adaptation of these courses as curriculum development projects. This was intended to go beyond individual involvement and integrate acceptance as a curriculum target at departmental level.
- **Develop Champions:** These would be disseminators of best practice in using the VLE – non-“techies” but deliverers representing our broad curriculum.
- **Establish a VLE Working Group:** This was made up of the learning technology Champions together with technical support staff, to assist with advising on training content and the drawing up of guidance for staff and students in how to use the VLE. The guidelines produced by the working group are now available on the Institute's Intranet at <http://www.belfastinstitute.ac.uk>

Enabling

We decided to put in place one of the most extensive staff development programmes we have ever attempted. Every full time member of academic staff - 456 - was to achieve a *Certificate in the Use of ICT in Teaching and Learning*. This is a programme we designed ourselves and had accredited by the Northern Ireland Open College Network. We deliver it through our own in-house team of deliverers and mentors. It consists of five modules: Word-processing, Internet, Email, Presentation Packages, and Information Handling accredited at level 2. Colleagues training colleagues proved very acceptable by all involved.

The Staff Development service had to work very closely with network administrators, technicians and Heads of Department to ensure staff involvement. HoDs gave staff 2 hours per week on their timetable to complete the 5 units over the year. It had to be a team effort managed by the Head of Staff Development and Assistant Director for Learning Technology who met regularly and reported on developments to the senior management team.

Earmarked resources for staff development, in conjunction with a significant investment in IT infrastructure, combined to create the facilitative environment to support change. The role of the Champions enabled the breakdown of the taboo among resistant staff: the notion that one has to be an IT expert to employ the learning technology. The Champions represented a broad cross-section of staff (language, literature, catering, special needs tutors etc) not “techies”. So if they could do it - anyone could do it.

Achieving change

We installed a VLE - Blackboard - and set about introducing staff to its merits. We opted for an organic developmental model, encouraging a small number of staff to access the VLE to see how they would react to using it. These staff were not information technology specialists but

accepted as good curriculum practitioners by their peers. We ran a number of awareness sessions and then left staff free to experiment and develop their confidence with the product.

This resulted in considerable positive feedback from this cohort of staff, indicating that the use of a VLE would not only be an enhancement to learning but that they were amenable to further training. This provided us with the impetus to introduce a major training programme that would impact greatly on the attitudes and perceptions of traditional lecturers to enable them to consider employing the VLE.

We then asked this small cohort of staff to disseminate their experience to programme team members. This led to a ground swell of positive feedback.

We then decided to invest in research and development initiatives. We asked programme teams to bid for funding to help them apply their newly developed skills to creating on-line content to support their courses. This would meet substitution costs to permit the team members to meet and author their material, upload onto the VLE etc. This overcame the key resource issue of staff time. This also meant teaching teams could link embedding learning technologies with specific courses and students and provide an instant application of training and skills in a practical context.

Positive feedback from students also added weight to the advantages and this offered non-threatening pressure to other members of teaching teams to employ the VLE.

Over about 20 Months the following was achieved:

- 250 staff trained in use of Blackboard VLE
- 517 courses/units using Blackboard in all curriculum areas e.g. FE & HE, key skills, GCSE/GCE, HND, languages, student support, outreach etc.
- 13,462 learners on VLE database
- 25 learning technology Champions
- 150 staff accredited
- 77 Staff completed certification using the VLE themselves
- Increased usage with SMEs and large employers

The use of ICT as a key teaching aid is now embedded among all staff. It has led to increased demand to access IT resources. This has resulted in a massive investment to realise a ratio of 1.3:1 computer access for FTE staff. We are currently reviewing our human resource pool to meet the technical support that on-line learning requires. Of 13,127 training days in 2001-02, 43% of these were involved in ICT training, with allied expenditure of 54% of the staff development budget. These figures alone illustrate the demand and resource allocation required as a result of our success in embedding learning technologies in the culture of our organisation. We are now placing greater emphasis on the andragogy of the use of this technology.

Leading

The use of a project management approach to monitor how learning was applied proved to be very successful. It provided a quality assurance mechanism to ensure the objectives of the training were being adhered to when a course was being adapted for delivery within the VLE. Each project manager had to provide an evaluation of how the VLE impacted on the learning of his or her students. The evaluations produced by staff enabled us to review and adapt our training programme and to prepare Institute guidelines for the effective use of the VLE.

The training provided, aligned with corporate targets, has truly changed the culture of the learning environment in the Institute. It has also proved to staff, in the clearest possible terms, the benefits of systematic training in assisting them to do their job better.

Learning

No real negatives in our experience because our expectations were exceeded e.g. more staff wanted to get involved in using our virtual learning environment than we had anticipated. This meant we had to allocate further resources - both financial (e.g. increased research and development costs for staff to experiment using the VLE) and human (e.g. with respect to employing additional trainers, more administrative time etc.).

It also impacted greatly on Heads of Department in that they suddenly were being asked to ensure resources e.g. laptops, data projectors, access to PCs etc were available for use by staff. This though was positive, because staff created the dynamic among senior managers that such resources were needed to enable them to apply their learning - thus actually contributing to the achievement of corporate targets that the senior managers were accountable for anyway. A strange impact we had not bargained or planned for!

It is important to try to encourage ownership of the change process by all senior managers as soon as possible and not permit them to leave driving the initiative to one department only.

When demand grew so fast this meant the Staff Department Unit had to find the energy and resources to support the process. If the energy and resources (and inclination/motivation on the part of the key staff) had been found wanting then the results might not have been so dramatic.

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