Staff Development Group Best Practice Award 2008

Description

Opportunities for Staff Development within project management practices [1]

Title: The Leeds Blend: Support for VLE use in blended learning

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3. Abstract
The VLE roll out project at Leeds aims to facilitate changes in teaching and support across all faculties in a large research-led institution. The project is professionally managed and brings together teams from each academic faculty and central services: ISS, The Library and Staff Development Unit (SDDU).

The outcomes achieved by the staff development activity were to ensure that consistent, quality assured, pedagogically and technically sound support and training is offered to users across the institution and that this provision can be evaluated and monitored. The role of VLE support officer is emerging as a new role within IT and systems support structures. The support provided for team working, matrix management and communities of practice have ensured that staff have been able to perform effectively in new roles and develop skills which will stand them in good stead for career progression at the end of the project.

4. Outline
The VLE roll out project at Leeds aims to facilitate changes in teaching and support across all faculties in a large research-led institution. The project is professionally managed and brings together teams from each academic faculty and central services: ISS, The Library and Staff Development Unit (SDDU).

The staff development supporting this project can be divided into three strands:

1. Training for central teams and faculty officers in using the new VLE
2. Training for central teams and faculty officers in how to support academics in their use of the VLE
3. Training for academics to use the new VLE

During the project these three strands have taken prominence at different points on the timeline in relation to project milestones.

It is the second strand of staff development – the training for central and faculty VLE teams in how to support academic users of the new system -which is the basis of this submission for a UCISA staff development prize.
5. **Scope of the project**

This is a £9m project lasting two years facilitating changes in teaching and support across nine faculties and several academic support units. University of Leeds has in the region of 34,000 FTE students and 4,000 academic staff. The project has been established specifically to deliver the roll out of Blackboard VLE across the institution in line with the University strategic plan to achieve inspirational and innovative teaching and meet student and staff demands for technology appropriate for learning and teaching in the 21st Century.

University of Leeds has many years experience and a strong reputation for innovation in VLE use and e-learning. Academic colleagues have been using the Bodington VLE on campus since 1996. The replacement of Bodington with Blackboard has brought the use of this system 'front and centre' in the University core business and IT systems provision.

The high level project outcomes include:
- Establish appropriate ongoing testing, development, evaluation, dissemination and support arrangements such that the University is capable of extending its use of blended learning beyond the period of the implementation project
- Migrate current Bodington materials and users onto the new VLE
- Provide students with an initial equitable experience of online learning materials and resources, appropriate to the faculty and individual discipline needs
- Evaluate the benefits to the University of various aspects of more advanced usage of blended learning through a number of pilots

**Project management**

The project management for the VLE implementation brings together academic teams supporting VLE use in each faculty, senior academics (PVC Learning and Teaching, postgraduate tutors and Pro-Deans Learning and Teaching) together with managers in support services- Staff and Departmental Development Unit, Library (including library systems, information literacy trainers and VLE service) and Information Systems Services (including users services, technical support, MIS systems integration and server teams).

See appendix 1 for project management structure diagram.

**Relevance**

**Recruitment and support**

Recruitment of ‘learning technologists’ continues to be problematic within the HE sector as candidates present with a wide range of skills, experience and backgrounds. For that reason consideration of the staff development needs of the VLE project team at Leeds began early. The development of skills and knowledge in relation to learning, teaching practice and use of VLEs is key to the successful delivery of this project. Each of the nine academic faculty deans had the opportunity to recruit a learning technologist (University grade 7) to support the VLE rollout in their faculty.

These nine new learning technologists (VLE support officers) were to work as part of the project team alongside new posts in the central functional support, migration support and technical support teams.

With such a large recruitment drive the recruitment to all of these posts was co-ordinated by the project with consistent job descriptions and probation plans where possible. Several Faculties were committed to recruiting VLE support officers with a particular discipline background; others were more interested in generic learning technology skills or previous VLE use. Senior members of the project team were present at each of the selection interviews.

**A community of practice**

In order to address concerns that faculty-based VLE support officers might feel isolated from the project central team regular themed meetings were organised to ensure that they were
able to meet regularly to share experiences and practice. Project blogs from central and faculty teams were also established to ensure that project team members are able to keep up-to-date with information feeding from the centre and vice versa. Feedback gathered in these meetings and in project management meetings with the assembled team show that this support has been vital to the development of these staff in their roles.

**Training strands**
The training programme for this group was based on the job roles and recognised the diverse backgrounds of the recruited officers. Following appointment to the project a tailor-made programme of staff development was put in place for the project team. A training needs analysis was carried out to identify key themes for training and possible gaps.

The first strand of staff development - **Initial training in the functionality and features of the Blackboard VLE** was provided by Blackboard in September 2007 for 18 of the VLE team.

The second strand of the programme - **Training for central teams and faculty officers in how to support academics in their use of the VLE** - began in October 2007 was designed to ensure that each of the support officers were able to use that technical knowledge of Blackboard to support and communicate the aims of the VLE rollout project within their Faculty and that when they met with academic staff they could give consistent and good quality advice in line with project aims and university learning and teaching strategy.

**Performance indicators**
Performance indicators within the project are matched to achievement against plans and project milestones. The three strands of staff development supported the achievement of these goals within the project. The success of staff development sessions was evaluated by the staff development team leader based on participant and trainer feedback.

Progress in role has been measured through peer observation of staff who grow and become more confident in their roles and monitoring of the quality of advice being given. Formal procedures of probation and 360 degree review have be used to identify ongoing and future training needs.

**Project timeline**
This timeline shows the three strands of staff development in relation to major project milestones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milestones</th>
<th>Project start August '08</th>
<th>Go Live April '08</th>
<th>Migrated teaching begins in VLE Sept '08</th>
<th>New teaching begins in VLE Jan '09</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SD strand 1</td>
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<td>SD strand 3</td>
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**Job roles**
The following were identified as common aspects of the job descriptions of VLE support officers, academic co-ordinators and VLE central team staff (total 31 people):

- Working with members of academic staff to convert existing materials to interactive e-learning materials in the VLE.
- Providing ‘local expert’ advice on the use of VLE tools.
- Enabling staff to develop their skills in producing, maintaining and supporting the use of e-learning materials.
- Providing advice on accessibility issues for web-based materials.
- Advising staff on internal and external resources and support available for e-learning.
- Advising staff on ways to create and structure content in the VLE.
- Providing support to staff ‘at deskside’ and in programme teams.
Staff development
To support their ability to perform these roles they were each invited to attend sessions organised by the University staff development team. Local experts from the Library, academic development and external experts such as Techdis, JISC colleagues and e-learning developers contributed to the programme to ensure that the content was up to date. The support programme included the following sessions:

- Workshop: The latest Issues in accessibility
- Lab: CourseGenie for e-learning
- Workshop: Copyright in the VLE
- Lab: Adding Audio to PowerPoint using Articulate
- Workshop: Using C& IT in teaching
- Lab: Getting Started with blogs and RSS Feeds
- Lab: Tools for e-learning - online polls, glossaries and mazes
- Workshop: Using VLE in teaching
- Lab: Question Mark Perception
- Lab: Using online tools to detect plagiarism (Turnitin)
- Lab: Wimba Voice tools
- Workshop: Using the VLE to support large group and small group teaching sessions
- Workshop: How the VLE support assessment
- Workshop: Delivering audio & video via the web
- Workshop: Deterring plagiarism
- Workshop: Using the VLE to support large group and small group teaching sessions
- Workshop: How the VLE support assessment
- Workshop: Delivering audio & video via the web

These sessions were designed to provide new information but also to encourage further reading and investigation by these staff for continued development of their knowledge and skills. Feedback was gathered from participants at the end of each session. Examples of feedback can be seen in Appendix 2.

Academic colleagues were invited to the sessions to give insights into how academic colleagues view some of the issues around use of VLEs. Following a review of progress additional sessions were added to the programme, some repeated and some extended to ensure that more gaps are covered. Additional sessions include ‘Improving presentation skills’ ‘Voice and the presenter’ and participants have also requested specific sessions on project management skills linked to their own career development.

Training for trainers
In addition to the staff development within their role some of the VLE and central support officers were offered the opportunity to train as Blackboard trainers to assist in the delivery of the third strand of staff development- The training for academics to use the new VLE. This third strand began in April 2008 following the ‘go live’ of the new system. 180 Blackboard training events (a combination of pedagogy workshops and hands on sessions) are planned in order to accommodate academic staff in all of the nine faculties before October 2008. 15 trainers have been trained and feedback on the delivery so far has been excellent indicating that the development of these trainers has been appropriate to this role.

Project Benefits

Benefits to the institution
The benefit to the institution of having a group of central and faculty-based VLE support officers able to give consistent, agreed, technical and pedagogical support to academic colleagues can be seen in the success of the project so far and in the future. The January 2009 milestone will be marked by the annual University of Leeds Learning and Teaching Conference. Each of the nine faculty VLE support officers will be encouraged to present at this conference alongside academic colleagues showcasing the work which has been done in the Sept 08- first semester teaching with the VLE.
Staff retention and career prospects
At the close of the VLE rollout project at Leeds staff recruited to the project for two years will either return to University departments and services where they hold a substantive role or, in many cases, complete their contracts. The training they have received while at Leeds has been specifically tailored to their needs in order to get them up to speed with learning and technology issues within the University but these skills are transferable and many are generic. Faculty Deans are being encouraged to find funding for the faculty based VLE support officers going forward in line with the five year strategy for VLE use.

Staff involved in this project will be well placed to apply for such learning technologist jobs going forward and will be encouraged to consider the CMALT\(^1\) accreditation scheme. Their experience of working within such a large managed project will stand them in good stead in the sector should they chose to follow careers as HE learning technologists, trainers or VLE support.

Applicability to other institutions
Since the majority of UK HE institutions now use VLEs to support teaching, the role of VLE support officer is emerging as a new role within IT and systems support structures. These roles have specific duties and responsibilities with regard to working with, and supporting, academic staff to the extent that they may become part of the pedagogical planning or redesign process. Consequently it is essential that new staff entering these roles are supported and trained appropriately. This example from University of Leeds offers a model for programmes of staff development applicable in other institutions and moves towards establishing, at least at Leeds, a standard knowledge and skills set for VLE support officers going forward.

\(^1\) http://www.alt.ac.uk/cmalt.html
6. Appendices

1. Project management structure diagram

- Learning & Teaching Board
- Sponsor (PVC L&T)
- L&T Systems Steering Group (and ISSG)
- Project Board (VLE Steering Group)
- VLE Project Management Team
- VLE Project Office & Communication
- Faculty Learning & Teaching Committees
- VLE Vision Group
- Faculty VLE Teams
- School VLE Implementation Teams (optional)
- Faculty VLE Pilot Teams
- VLE Project Staff Dev’t Team
- VLE Project Functional Support Team
- VLE Project Technical Team
- Software Supplier

- Staff Devt Team Leader
- Srn Staff Training & Devt Officer
- VLE Training & Devt Officer
- E-learning Graphics Designer
- VLE Course Coordinator
- Functional Team Leader
- Functional and Migration Support (3 posts)
- Function and Migration Support (Content/Repository specialist)
- Technical Team Leader
- VLE Technical Development & Support Officer (2 posts)
- Integration/Migration Developers
- Web Designer
- ISS support (UNIX, DBA, Help Desk)
## 2. Sample staff development session feedback comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Feedback comments</th>
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</table>
| BB Academic Suite Administration    | Following this session I will….  
- now evaluate with the faculty academics what Bb can do for them.  
- think about the faculty implementation plan  
- develop some resources for the VLE |
| BB Academic Suite Essentials        | Following the session I will…  
- I am now able to look how I can use the tools available in the faculty.  
- now use Blackboard  
- look to establish the process to make configuration decisions  
- practice and trouble shoot |
| Workshop: The latest Issues in Accessibility | This session was very useful for VLE co-ordinators etc |
| Workshop: Copyright in the VLE      | Following the session I will…  
- Talk to academic staff about VLE content and copyright issues.  
- Use knowledge in future delivery  
- Do more research on the subject |
| Workshop: Using C& IT in Teaching   | Following this session I will do more research. |
| Lab: Getting Started with blogs and RSS Feeds | - Very good introduction to the subject, well balanced  
- Following the session I will now look at the VLE functional support blog in learning objects or elgg |
| Lab: Tools for e-learning - online polls, glossaries and mazes | I have never really looked at these in great depth but I can really see the benefits these could have to teaching. |
| Workshop: Using VLE in Teaching     | At a high level it picked up the key points of the subject – I have lots more reading to do |
| Lab: Using online tools to detect plagiarism (Turnitin) | Following the session I will – Provide a better support service for Turnitin and Grademark users |
| Using the VLE to support large group and small group teaching sessions | - Excellent & engaging presentation, useful group work and debates, will now look more closely at research into the impact of VLEs.  
- This session would be useful to roll out to all staff  
- This session should be compulsory for all staff |
7. **Supporting statement.**

As Staff Development Manager for the VLE project at Leeds I am able to confirm that the staff development opportunities provided within this project have served to aid cultural change within our University. The VLE roll-out is a key transformational project for us this year and the skills and abilities of our VLE support officers are very much part of the success of the project. Every part of the programme has focused on the “people benefits” for the staff involved. These benefits have been aligned with institutional aims as part of our project strategy and goals. The project is ongoing, but the specific strand of training described in this submission is now complete and the training team who have delivered it certainly deserve a prize.

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