

Issues Paper 3: Personnel issues in MLE/VLE interventions

Getting the right personnel in place is surprisingly difficult and can have effects that go beyond simple delays in the project. These effects interact with personnel issues in the participating institutions to produce a number of further effects. Personnel issues have provided some interesting challenges to the MUSCLE project. It would be easy to say that this is merely a local concern, and that the project was just unlucky. However, a previous evaluation of the JISC DiVLE programme, Link^{ER}, suggested that this is a common experience in shorter-term project work. This Issues Paper uses MUSCLE examples to highlight the way personnel factors impact on a project. It complements Issues Paper 1: Strategic issues and provides insights into individuals experience of factors associated with organisational and cultural issues discussed in Issues Paper 2.

In-project staffing

There are two aspects to personnel issues to consider: within-project staffing and wider staff and personnel issues in the participating organisations. Some of the issues raised in MUSCLE centred on difficulties in project staffing. In particular a VLE/MLE Developer could not be employed until the end of the 1st year and neither a Curriculum Officer for Schools and an Administrator were ever appointed which led to a variety of problems both within the project team and more widely.

The delayed employment of a VLE/MLE developer was problematic in a quite conventional way, essentially causing cumulative delays centring on liaison between institutions.

Establishing effective partnerships requires a shared understanding and is not something that can be achieved quickly. For projects involving developmental work, implementation and adoption of a common piece of software, it is important to invest time in building working relationships that will ensure both institutional and practitioner commitment to the

project vision, which is arguably a necessary prerequisite to operational support and a sense of ownership of the work.

Failure to appoint the Curriculum Officer (Schools), a position not initially seen as potentially problematic, had effects that were more complex. Initially the intention was to aim these posts at teacher level, with the expectation that this would give teachers a voice and sense of ownership, enable them to inform decisions made re software, and to provide a link by working with the VLE/MLE Developer. However, it soon became clear that such a person would not have sufficient weight with the other seven high schools nor was the time available to have an appropriate impact on all the high schools at a sufficiently high level. To address this situation, it was decided to utilise the LEA ICT Advisors who already go into all of the schools. This approach offered both the opportunity of engaging existing key players in the work and providing a mechanism for sustainability of project developments beyond the lifetime of the project. Unfortunately, not only were LEA ICT Advisors already stretched to capacity, but one advisor was moved and his replacement did not take up their post until early this year (2005).

Such problems are common. In particular it may be hard to find staff with the appropriate mix of skills available to work in the time-frame envisaged. The shorter the project the greater the problem this presents. Suitable staff may simply not be available to start on the due date, and may also be anxious to find new posts before the project actually finishes.

Personnel issues outside the project

Beyond internal project staffing issues there were a range of personnel-centred issues in the participating organisations.

LIMITED RESOURCES IN OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Although Blackpool Borough Council (BBC) enthusiastically received the concept of the MUSCLE project, there was no allocation of staff time from within the LEA's Advisory Team to the MUSCLE project. Despite further meetings with the VLE/MLE Co-ordinator with some of the Advisors and Heads of Departments in Schools, the general consensus was that the Advisory Team and Schools themselves were without adequate human resource / support in taking on board this initiative.

PROBLEMS IN DEALING WITH TRANSIENT STAFFING ARRANGEMENTS IN LEAs AND ELSEWHERE

The rapidly shifting pattern of staffing arrangements in the LEA caused a number of problems. Constant transition within the LEA's key ICT posts led to excessive and unmanageable demands on staff in these areas. This combined unhealthily with the project staff problems described previously to limit the extent to which the project could work with outside bodies, in particular the schools. Changes in leadership within the LEA influenced the continuity of their relationship with the project as well as their focus of interest and levels of commitment to the project, which inevitably had to compete with other demands for LEA attention.

Similar effects occurred in other organisations, typically where technical staff changed, this resulted in a loss of local enthusiasts for the project. Ideally, it would be useful for key staff within each institution to second or employ staff in the long term in order to support the development, implementation, practitioner training and embedding necessary for a successful MLE to exist.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

This has been relatively unproblematic so far in MUSCLE, this maybe a result of the limited demands made on staff, a consequence of limited progress made to date. There was a sense that staff perceived the VLE/MLE as simply another ILT tool rather than a

completely new way of teaching and learning, and that the implications of the latter remain unclear.

Typically "obstacles to change are closely associated with the established practices and cultural traditions of the teaching faculty." (Jaffee 1998), and barriers encountered can include a lack of technical knowledge, recognition, incentives and clear IT policies at institutional level, as well as negative perceptions surrounding the move from traditional styles of teaching (Sosabowski, Herson and Lloyd, 1998; Maier, White and Barnett, 1997). Problems also exist regarding the involvement of staff such as library and information specialists who do not come from a traditional teaching background in the provision of course materials (eg. Edwards 1997).

Ways of dealing with resistance to change focus on engagement and education. It is necessary to engage with objections and to maintain lines of communication with objectors. Objections maybe based on fact or opinion, but are worth listening to in either case as they help in improving the implementers' understanding of the situation.

Promoting a culture of openness is useful. Appropriate education and training is necessary to give participants the confidence to deal with the expected changes. Finally, it is essential to give clear explanations of the potential benefits of the VLE/MLE both for students and for staff affected by implementation.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING AND SUPPORT ISSUES

The INSPIRAL project suggested that, "Staff development could be seen as both a resourcing issue and an infrastructure issue. However, it has its own specific problems."

In the MUSCLE project, we found that resourcing was a key factor in staff development.

Resource shortages combined with an underestimation of the enormity and importance of the institutional culture change a VLE/MLE requires in order to succeed. There were two aspects to this. First, the adoption of the VLE/MLE involves inevitable changes to teaching style and approach but there was a significant underestimation of amount of staff training

required to enable FE staff to adopt a confident VLE/MLE-based approach to teaching and learning. Secondly, there was an underestimation of the level and amount of training required for staff to create, organise and upload interactive resources effectively. The latter is a key issue in that in these situations there is something of a 'chicken and egg' scenario in that staff will not use an empty VLE/MLE and yet are not capable of populating it either.

These findings accord with those of the INSPIRAL project, which suggested that:

- **Support and training for staff needs to be ongoing, and means more than just teaching them to use the technology. New skills and new roles must be incorporated.**
- **Pedagogical issues need to be incorporated, to ensure the academic validity of teaching and using information online. These issues have a history of being ignored by librarians in particular, but for academics to accept the close library input necessary, this must change.**

Within the MUSCLE project there was evidence of support from library staff, the challenge was to bring staff together to support one another. A further possibility is to consider providing external help in populating the VLE/MLE with learning materials if the human and financial resources are available. Alternatively, it becomes a question of motivating and educating staff, both to give them the necessary skills and to give them sufficiently good reason for committing themselves to the work involved. There have to be clear positive benefits for teachers for them to commit themselves to the process of VLE/MLE implementation.

Questions to think about

When, how and who will select project staff?

How and who will introduce and facilitate project staff in meeting key players within all partner organisations?

How will existing staff be involved in the project, who will decide, and will necessary time be allocated to enable them to meet the demands of the project?

Who will monitor and ensure that existing staff are actively involved in the project?

What opportunities will be organised to enable staff working on different aspects of the project to discuss project progress, share concerns and tackle problems?

Useful references

<http://inspiral.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/documents/documents.html>

Brophy, P. Markland, M. and Jones, C. (2003) Link^{ER}: *Linking Digital Libraries and Virtual Learning Environments: Evaluation and Review Final Report: Formative Evaluation of the DiVLE Programme* . Deliverable D5, Link^{ER} Project. CERLIM Centre for Research in Library & Information Management

http://www.cerlim.ac.uk/projects/linker/linkerd5_master.doc

MUSCLE is a joint project between Blackpool and The Fylde College, Blackpool Borough Council and CSALT at Lancaster University

MUSCLE Issues papers present short summaries of essential questions arising from the project on issues that can affect the development and implementation of cross-institution VLE/MLEs. They take the form of short descriptions of experiences and their implications and are addressed to developers and practitioners. Feedback to the MUSCLE team is welcomed - please address enquiries and comments to Steve Musgrave at smu@blackpool.ac.uk