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VLE mistakes - how to get it all wrong!

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Introduction

This report goes through some of the ways in which you can really mess up introducing a VLE (and, indeed, online learning generally) to your college. Although most of the examples are from real colleges, none of them are mentioned by name. Some (maybe many!) of the mistakes were entirely my fault. So here they are, in no particular order:

1. Keep it all to yourself.

The mistake

One person, sitting in their office (having been enthused by ILT Champion training, or just met a persuasive sales rep, or read something on FERL) buys a VLE, and doesn't involve anyone else at all in the process. So the VLE sits there, hardly used, if at all, because no-one else knows it exists, or what it's for, or what it can be used for.

The solution

It's unlikely you'll have lots of people knocking on your door demanding to be allowed to use a VLE. The decision to get one is likely to come from a few people, possibly ILT Champions, possibly finance directors anxious to spend the money from the NLN. But, once a decision to buy is made, then it's important to involve as many staff as possible in the process. Get suppliers to do demos, and involve as many teaching staff as possible. Let them have some say in the eventual decision on which one to buy. Give them some ownership of the process.

2. Don't provide any content.

The mistake

VLEs aren't only about content, they are about better support to students too. But, nevertheless, in many cases you would want to get some content too. Don't only buy the

software (the VLE) to deliver online courses, and then forget about the courseware. You can't deliver online without the content, and you can't expect staff to suddenly make it all appear. It's like buying a book with **all** the pages left intentionally blank.

The solution

The cost of a VLE is the cost of the software, PLUS the cost of purchasing/creating content (PLUS a few other things too...). Make sure you have at least some content available from the start. Look at what is being produced as a result of the NLN. Look at commercial suppliers. Look at producing some in-house content, using NLN funded resources.

3. Don't train the staff.

The mistake

Don't assume that staff can just pick up the VLE, and then start to use it effectively immediately. They can't.

The solution

Provide them with training. They'll need training in basic IT skills, like using email and browsers; they'll need training in using the particular VLE you've bought; and they'll need training in delivering content and supporting students online. This is a significant part of the cost of a VLE, so don't forget it.

4. Train the staff in the wrong things at the wrong time.

The mistake

Staff training isn't automatically a good thing in itself. Training staff with skills they don't need which they can't use is not empowering, it's disempowering. Don't train them in complex IT skills they don't need, using complex or expensive IT equipment they don't have (how many colleges run PowerPoint training, then later have to face staff who can't use it because they can't get access to data projectors?).

The solution

Make sure training is appropriate and timely. It's got to help them do the job now; not a job they **might** need to do at some distant point in the future.

5. Forget about the underpinning infrastructure (1)

The mistake

The mistake is thinking staff can share computers with 20 others, or use the ones down the stairs, along the corridor, out of the door, across the car park, in the LRC. They won't do it, and why should they?

The solution

Before getting individual staff involved in online learning, make sure they have adequate facilities - i.e. a working, networked computer of adequate specification, on their own desk, with the software they need.

6. Forget about the underpinning infrastructure (2)

The mistake

If the underpinning infrastructure is flaky (and it still is in many colleges) are you really ready to deliver online courses? Students - and staff - need to know that the VLE is accessible 24/7, when and where they want it.

The solution

Make sure your VLE, and the technical infrastructure which supports it, is as reliable as possible. Have backups. Consider hosting it externally. Make sure your technical staff are trained, competent, and adequately paid.

7. The big bang approach.

The mistake

This is when you (or, rather, SMT) write this wonderful action plan (usually before you buy a VLE) saying that all your courses will be online by such and such a date - and then you hit the reality of what this really means, get disillusioned when there's only half a dozen courses partially online after the first six months, and just give up.

The solution

It takes a long time to create the culture where staff routinely use the VLE as a normal part of their class delivery. A very long time. Don't be too ambitious, set realistic targets within achievable time frames. Work with a small number of enthusiasts, in the first instance, to get a small number of courses online. Show people that this technology really does work!

8. Everyone is going to be really enthusiastic about VLEs!

The mistake

Thinking that "Everyone is going to be really enthusiastic about VLEs!". They probably aren't, in the first instance. Why should they be? Technology is often unreliable, materials may be hard to find, access to equipment might be restricted, and they've been delivering classes perfectly well for years without using VLEs, so why bother now?

The solution

Appeal to their self interest. Show them how VLEs can make their life easy (e.g. automatic assessment, online handouts, easier class management, etc). Tell them they can do a lot of work from home - no need to sit in an overcrowded office, after a long commute in winter traffic! (Of course, management needs to agree to this approach. But it'll come eventually....).

Appeal to their professionalism. Show them how a VLE can provide a better service to students (e.g. better support). Show them how online learning can improve teaching and learning.

And be honest! There is going to be more work in the short term, as they learn new skills. But in the long term, their life will probably get easier, and certainly more interesting.

9. Forget about quality control.

The mistake

Putting content on which is full of errors, factual, spelling and grammatical, is a very poor advert for a college. Having a badly designed layout makes it hard to read, and makes it less effective as learning materials. Having content which isn't accessible to disabled students (e.g. visually impaired) is not only wrong, it may soon be illegal.

The solution

Have some quality control. Have a third party check over content before it is uploaded to the VLE. Have a design specialist create course templates. Make sure your content is accessible to everyone.

10. Have too much quality control.

The mistake

Being too careful about what is published online might make people reluctant to do anything at all, because they can't compete with professionally produced content.

The solution

Have some quality control, but don't expect all singing all dancing materials. This is a learning process for everyone, and, inevitably, there will be mistakes as people progress. Get rid of factual errors, and grammar and spelling mistakes, but don't expect too much more in the short term. The important thing is that the content works in a teaching and learning sense.

11. Saying all courses should be supported or delivered online.

The mistake

Trying to force all staff to deliver or support classes online is a mistake. Don't push them too far, too fast. Not all staff will be able to deliver online. Not all courses are appropriate for online delivery. Not all students want online delivery.

The solution

Make sure courses you offer online, or support online, are appropriate - this means getting the right, skilled staff; getting the right content; having the support of the students.

12. Spending the money too soon.

The mistake

Don't rush into buying the first VLE you see. It will probably be too expensive, it won't work, and, crucially, you won't know what questions to ask potential suppliers. It will be an expensive mistake.

The solution

Look around at what other colleges do. Read the case studies. Ask them how many students are actually using it (if you ask a company this, they'll tell you how many licenses have been sold - for example, they may say that such and such a college has bought a license for 500

users. However, this emphatically does **not** mean that 500 students are using it. You want the real figures, not the sales figures).

Look at guest logins from other colleges. Talk to a variety of suppliers, and get demos from them. Ask them to show you what you want it to do - not what it can do! These may be two entirely different things.

Read the guidance documents from JISC, appearing in Spring 2001.

And finally...

Moving to online provision and support is a major change for colleges and staff, and will take some time to embed. But the benefits to teaching and learning, and to student management, are enormous. VLEs won't replace face to face teaching (in the same way that online shopping hasn't yet closed down the supermarkets). But they will enhance and complement existing teaching methods, and, eventually, radically change the way we all work and learn.

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