

Report from the 2nd INSPIRAL Workshop, held at the Main Library, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, September 4, 2001

Identification of Priorities and Solutions for VLE / MLE and Digital Library Integration

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Speakers:

F Cuna Ekmekcioglu, (INSPIRAL Co-Manager, University of Strathclyde): "*INSPIRAL Progress to Date*" (available in [PowerPoint](#) and [html](#))

Richard Mobbs, (Head of the Learning Technology Team, University of Leicester): "*Virtual Learning Environments, Libraries and Institutional Change*" (available in [PowerPoint](#) and [html](#))

Ruth Jenkins, (Team Leader of the Learning and Research Support Team at the Orchards Learning Resources Centre, University of Birmingham): "*Building on BUILDER: making the hybrid library part of the virtual Campus*" (available in [PowerPoint](#) and [html](#))

Claire Ryan, (Big Blue Project, University of Leeds): "*Putting 2 and 2 together and making 5? How the Hybrid Library adds value to student learning in a virtual learning environment*" (available in [PowerPoint](#) and [html](#))

[Participants](#)

[Programme](#)

Workshop Report

1. Introduction

This workshop is essentially the last INSPIRAL event to analyse and identify the most pertinent issues within VLE / MLE and digital library linkage at institutional and organisational level. Participants included representatives from 3 FE institutions, 2 commercial vendors, and 22 from the HE sector, with experience in the IT, commercial, teaching, library and project sector. The aim of this workshop was to once again build upon issues that have been identified in previous INSPIRAL research. For this purpose the workshop sought to analyse the main issues that had already been identified and determine solutions to these issues, with the prime focus of providing JISC with recommendations in the key areas of concern for future research and investment in VLE / MLE and digital library integration.

In preparation for the event, and to familiarise themselves with INSPIRAL's research and findings to date, participants were asked to read the forum reports from:

Glasgow (<http://inspiral.cdjr.strath.ac.uk/documents/forumrep1.html>) and

London (<http://inspiral.cdjr.strath.ac.uk/documents/forumrep2.html>),

Leicester workshop report (<http://inspiral.cdjr.strath.ac.uk/documents/workshopleicester.pdf>),

stakeholder consultation report (<http://inspiral.cdjr.strath.ac.uk/documents/interviewsumm.pdf>).

The workshop started with an overview of INSPIRAL's aims and objectives, an introduction to the guest speakers, a run through of the agenda for the day and general housekeeping duties, along with

a special thanks to the University of Birmingham for providing us with the facilities and a particular mention for Ruth Jenkins for helping the INSPIRAL team organise this event.

2. Presentations (1)

2.1 INSPIRAL: Progress to Date by F Cuna Ekmekcioglu

This presentation provided a brief analysis of the findings from INSPIRAL's research to date, and consisted of the two forums, one workshop, seventeen stakeholder interviews, as well as the online discussion from INSPIRAL's two mailing lists and the interim findings, a complete version of which has already been submitted to the funding body only. The main themes to the visions and barriers of VLE/MLE and digital library linkage were highlighted.

In preparation for the Breakout Session the limits of the study were again emphasised to aid the discussion and verification of the content of the Breakout Session themes were provided.

Following a request for questions or comments, to which none were received, the first guest speaker was introduced.

2.2 "Virtual Learning Environments, Libraries and Institutional Change" by Richard Mobbs

An initial overview of the VLE that exists at the University of Leicester was presented by Richard Mobbs, charting its origins from 1996 to the current support of the UK's highest number of Post Graduate distance learners. It was noted that the evolution of this service was brought about by the close collaboration within the university itself.

Richard Mobbs presentation explored the following issues that are of relevance when considering the identification of the learner and learner needs, these included;

- Different styles of learning - involving the increased numbers of learners in education and how their progress or lack of it can be monitored
- Different stages of learning - with regard to the growing number of mature students who may be in education for the first time or may be returning to education for whatever reason, this may include promotion barriers, or staff development issues, part time students with additional responsibilities and the growing numbers of distance learners.
- Different levels of skills in elearning environment - some learners adapt easier than others to an online learning environment, therefore ways to ensure that all learners are benefiting from the elearning teaching and learning experience is essential
- Basic teaching requirement to produce knowledgeable and employable graduates that can cope in the changing information society.

As well as highlighting what is currently on offer at the University of Leicester, in terms of online teaching and learning facilities, Richard Mobbs provided a summary of what is required of a successful VLE, this included;

- Course Management
- Course Outline
- Assessment
- Personal Information and Management
- Communications
- System and Database Requirements

In addition, it was outlined that the idea and understanding of a totally integrated MLE is unlikely to happen. The MLE is a concept that encompasses the whole University, while a VLE is the software, a box of tools that enable teaching and online to occur. While prime barriers to the concept of a totally integrated University system was identified as the risk of sensitive and

confidential data held within the administrative set up of the university and the financial costs of the commercial agents currently dealing in the software.

To conclude the presentation the leading vendors in the production and sale of VLE/MLE tools were noted, and the current commercial costs of each were given. Significantly, Richard Mobbs indicated that whatever VLE was adopted, it is the VLE that has to fit into the existing environment that encompasses the institution. With the recognition at institutional level of these important issues;

- Clear objectives for the use of VLEs have to be established
- The number of resources necessary to implement and support the system
- How many students will the VLE cater for
- Cost of the system (hardware & software)
- Cost of training and support
- Support agreed standards (IMS) for integration

Questions from participants followed.

The main issue of interest for participants included the reasons behind the University of Leicester choosing BlackBoard over the other commercial outlets. Richard Mobbs included the following items as issues in the decision;

- Cost
- Noted that Microsoft has been investing in BlackBoard and Learnwise
- Talked to technical staff to see how services were developing when student's needs assessed.

3. Breakout Session One

During the first breakout session, participants were asked to discuss the two or three main issues of concern involved in VLE/MLE and digital library integration and then prioritise them. Keeping these in mind for the second breakout session, which will make recommendations to JISC. The outcome of the group discussions are provided below:

Group One

- Implementation not necessarily a cost saver or an investment
- Value has to be added in terms of;
 - Alternative teaching methods
 - Depth of information
 - More individual learning
- Integration of different sources of data requires;
 - Case studies and models of best practice
- Knowledge of how to locate good content is essential and could be helped by;
 - Increasing communication between academics and librarians
 - Institutional change and a willingness to collaborate and share resources

Group Two

- Need for the institutional infrastructure to adopt an attitude and willingness towards change
- Concerns over the preset content from US vendors considering the differences between the US and UK system of education
- An institutional agreement is required to determine a consensus of use of VLEs by academics and learners
- Patchy integration at institutional level lead to patchy use
- Spoon-feeding is not in the interest of learners, in terms of long term employability
- A method of assessing the use of VLEs by learners to determine true cost effectiveness is needed

- Standards in buying VLEs are required at institutional level, as many VLEs are marketed at departmental level
- An understanding of why institutions are buying VLEs and what they are used for, JISC could help with the provision of;
 - Best practice guidelines
 - Case studies
 - Standardisation of effective implementation

Group Three

- Projects within departments tend not to be shared, this leads to;
 - Duplication
 - Different departments within the one institution using different VLEs
 - Incompatibility between different systems
 - Potential of decisions being made at institutional level to implement another VLE regardless of departmental concerns over the migration of resources
- Managing expectations;
 - Staff and students need to be aware of the limitations of the system
 - Changing professional roles at institutional level and the creation of 'hybrid staff', with effective means of utilising these skills
- Need for research specifically identifying needs of the learner, which include;
 - How learners access VLEs?
 - Cost to the learner and how much they are prepared to pay to use VLEs
 - How learners use VLEs and what they use them for?
 - How learners use library resources?
- Technical barriers;
 - Learners accessing from work
 - Methods of access in general, including PC/PDA/mobile phones
 - Disability issues (which BlackBoard and WebCT are investigating)
 - Different Platforms
 - Different VLEs
 - Consortia of different institutions
- Sharing Content;
- Need to define standardisation in the areas of interoperability and metadata
- Level of granularity needs to be defined before content is created
- How to integrate the library into the VLEs?
- How students use library resources?

4. Presentations (2)

4.1 "Building on BUILDER: making the hybrid library part of the virtual Campus" by Ruth Jenkins

The evolution of the BUILDER Hybrid Library was initially provided, with an overview of how the portal worked and the tools it comprises. These tools encompass facilities for learners, at various stages in their HE careers, and for lecturers. It was noted that while BUILDER was not a VLE, it would be relatively easy to integrate it into one. For the purposes of INSPIRAL, BUILDER carried out an evaluation of its services, most notably the views of the learners and institutional concerns over the success and integration of BUILDER into an MLE, were discussed. These have been summarised below:

What Learners liked:

- All-round access
- Ability to tailor to their specific needs : aided by identification with BUILDER "characters"

- Collection of disparate resources in one place
- Tailored profiled cross searches
- Training, self-help and the ability to book
- Exam papers and electronic short loan

What Learners wanted:

- Access to additional information, including;
 - Course materials
 - School information
 - Careers
 - Student Union
- All information must be current and timely

Issues over the integration of BUILDER into an MLE:

- An MLE at the University of Birmingham will include:
 - Portals
 - Authentication
 - Virtual learning environments
 - Personal progress "reports"
 - Changes in library management systems
- Idea of fitting into existing University system rather than the evolution of a new system
- What will be the new role of the Library within a VLE?
- Within the University the following should be established;
 - Setting up a Corporate Web Team and Learning Development Unit
 - Encouraging the development of more E-services
 - Respond to/encourage e-University initiatives

It was also reported that the University of Birmingham are currently using WebCT as the VLE, often only as a portal to resources created with other tools. The IT and library staff work together in supporting the VLE, however, courses tend to be created by a small number of individuals, with some lecture notes included by support staff. A case study was also carried out on a module delivered by the School of Business, which included a reading list, links to electronic journal articles via EBSCO and Proquest, Electronic Key Texts, and links to market research reports. The findings were positive, with a number of quality and evaluated resources being brought together and easily located by students, however some problems were identified and are listed below:

- Relies on individuals to compile resources
- Not scalable
- Hard and timely to maintain
- Does not incorporate other elements of a library service, e.g. enquiries, ILL etc.
- An element of "spoon-feeding" may hamper the acquirement of research skills gained by browsing and background reading
- Not all academics are happy with the input of librarians into their courses

Solutions to these barriers were identified as:

- Integration of systems; an objective of the ANGEL Project
- Liaison between librarians and those who develop VLEs
- Liaison between librarians, academics and learners

To conclude Ruth Jenkins highlighted the following as issues that need to be discussed:

- Guidelines for the exchange of courses and learning objects between institutions and VLEs
- Metadata standards for learning objects
- Copyright/intellectual property freedom vs rights

Questions from participants followed and included:

- Do the most recently and commonly used materials flash up?
 - University of Birmingham use Talis, which makes it possible to attach information to a particular person and record what they did last with that information, users can set preferences if they require help in a particular area. A profile can be customised but it needs to be done in ways that protect personal data.
- Does BUILDER incorporate DNER guidelines?
 - When BUILDER started there was no DNER, however ANGEL's remit should enable virtual library services to be connected to the DNER.
- How far can the lecturers involved in the creation of course material?
 - They can modify reading lists on screen and then send an email to the librarian to change it on the service.

4.2 "Putting 2 and 2 together and making 5? How the Hybrid Library adds value to student learning in a virtual learning environment" by Claire Ryan

The aim of the Leeds Hybrid Library Project was noted as the exploration of "how the integration of learning resources - especially library and information resources - into a managed learning environment can give added value to student learning". Objectives of the project included to:

- Develop a prototype, which is size- & feature-scaleable
- Explore which resources and approaches best met students' needs
- Assess the impact on existing library services
- Evaluate the impact of their initiative on student learning

Two VLEs are in operation at the University of Leeds, where an established e-content already existed within the library, and uses SiteBuilder to provide links to quality web sites evaluated by librarians, as well as links to RDN and DNER resources, and the merging of these resources was able to establish:

- Nathan Bodington Building - an undergraduate teaching and learning environment, however learners will only use the Nathan Bodington Building if it is used by their departments to develop course resources
- Virtual Science Park - a post-graduate research facility as well as a commercial venture

An evaluation of these services was carried out and comprised questionnaires and focus groups targeting the 585 learners and semi-structured interviews with academics, and obtained a response rate of 25% from the learners. The key findings are listed below:

- 79% of those who responded used the facility
- 56% used the hybrid library more than the University library; 44% vice versa
- 86% thought the course content was relevant
- 46% thought it helped them make more efficient use of their time, around 40% said that it used up around the same amount of their time
- 58% accessed from the library; 61% from campus; 27% from home, with some listing more than one option for access

Perceptions from academic staff were noted as:

- Reading list facility was highly valued
- Digitised readings form important service for students
- Presence of essential resources makes students use and explore it
- Often felt to have improved quality of learning

In general this research concluded that:

- This approach was beneficial
- Has led to an increase in flexibility, which is valued by the learners
- The importance of the commitment in implementing course materials was noted to be essential to the success of the service

- Good quality core materials was also essential
- Students will use and value an open learning environment if the course is orientated towards their use

As well as providing valuable information in the opinions of users and academics the evaluation also helped identify important factors in improving the services, these included:

- A steady move toward a mainstream service
- A focus on modules which;
 - Have a strong research/study skills component
 - Register a large number of students
 - Contain distance learning elements
 - Already exploit the VLE environment

Strategic ways forward were noted as:

- Develop ways of quickly/automatically building new libraries
- Explore subject portals for specific groups
- Develop integrated links to national services and developments
- Press for development of institutional infrastructure

A demo "hybrid library can be viewed at

<http://www.fldu.leeds.ac.uk/opensite/nbodington/students/library/hylib/>

with further information being available from Michael Emly at m.emly@leeds.ac.uk.

Questions from participants followed and included:

- If the name of the Nathan Bodington Building is confusing learners who expect a physical location, would simply changing it's name stop the confusion and perhaps increase the use of the virtual space?
 - Apart from the historical naming of the VLE, the idea of a building is thought to be a good thing. Where in effect, most courses now tell the learners what it is and where to find it.
- Was LIS-Links discussion on the use of citations on student learning and issue in the evaluative study?
 - This had to be eliminated, as the use of citations was regarded as too wide

5. Second Breakout Session

The priority areas that were discussed in the first breakout session were collated, the recurring themes noted and then divided up between the groups to prioritise them in terms of future JISC aims. Groups were also asked to identify ways in which these issues could be solved. Outcome of the group discussions are given below:

Group One:

Priority Areas:

1. Communication and collaboration
2. Standards: guidelines/best practice etc.
3. Learner Needs

Overall the group reported that they felt standards and learner needs would be better and easier addressed if communication and collaboration within and between institutions could be improved. In effect the three areas were interlinked and that communication and collaboration was viewed as an internal problem, which could be improved, by the likes of staff development, training and better dissemination of project findings from JISC.

In summary the group highlighted the following areas where JISC involvement could improve the situation at institutional level:

- Effective and innovative dissemination of what is available in this area
- Dissemination of findings at all levels within an institution
- JISC taking authority in the area and admitting that the problem exists and looking into why it exists
- Looking into the funding of an HE funded projects portal, providing an overview of the projects past and present and a mechanism to link similar projects together
- Improving interoperability between projects and institutions

Group Two:

Priority Areas:

1. IT skills and training
2. Institutional infrastructure
3. Teaching and learning – spoon-feeding

It was noted that the institutional infrastructure was not a problem that JISC could possibly solve, and that this issue would remain as an institutional area for concern. JISC problem areas were identified as:

- JISC tend to bombard institutions with information
- Information is not disseminated well
- Information is difficult to discover on the JISC web site

Ways in which JISC could solve the issues identified here were given as:

- IT courses should not presume IT skills from the learner; JISC could implement standards which specify a basic level of skills that are expected from the learner
- IT Skills and training sessions could be run by JISC, following the example of NetSkills
- JISC may need to target academics so that they know what JISC's aims are; better and effective dissemination would ease this problem

Group Three:

Priority areas:

1. Managing expectations
2. Financial: resourcing - not a cost saver
3. Integration of different sources of data: case studies/models

Once more the group identified specific areas where the institution would need greater input in alleviating the barriers to integration. In this instance managing expectations and financial concerns were viewed as local problems and not necessarily a prime area where JISC could implement effective change. However, the group stressed the importance of the role of JISC in providing and promoting information, guidelines, examples of best practice, contacts, and standards. The Group also suggested the following ways forward for JISC:

- More funding to turn projects into services
 - Wider professional dissemination of findings, including academics and librarians, as well as outside the FE / HE sector
 - JISC should implement guidelines to help academics/librarians etc to see through the sales pitch of VLE / MLE vendors
 - JISC should use its authority to persuade commercial outlets to make systems easier to link with other systems, by using standards such as XML / IMS
 - Funding of national projects to solve national problems rather than different institutions coming up with a variety of solutions, e.g. areas such as;
 - How to pass data about students around including authentication/authorisation
 - How to pass data about learning objectives around

- Learners will be associated with different institutions throughout their "lifelong learning". JISC should make it easier to access this information from the likes of FE / NHS
- JISC should look into accessing learner information based on some form of standard scheme, for example national insurance numbers, as well as implementing the appropriate data protection
- Provision of information on how institutions can work and compete with what they have got
- JISC needs to talk to academics as well as academic services

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the following issues were identified as priority areas:

- Communication and collaboration
- Institutional infrastructure – role and status
- IT skills and training for both students and staff
- Teaching and learning – concerns about spoon-feeding
- Learner needs
- Standards: guidelines/best practice
- Content provision/access – sharing content
- Managing expectations
- Financial issues – resourcing
- Integration of different sources of data: case studies/models
- Technical barriers

In order to resolve these issues the participants suggested JISC should:

- Put more effort into the effective and innovative dissemination of findings
- Liaise with academics as well as academic services
- Identify priority areas where standards/guidelines/best practice need to be set
- Target various levels within the institution with their findings, projects etc.
- Provide more funding to turn projects into services
- Fund studies/research which will investigate learner needs in terms of library/VLE integration
- Implement guidelines to help academics as well as academic services to see through the sales pitch of VLE / MLE vendors
- Use its authority to persuade commercial outlets to make systems easier to link with other systems, by using standards such as XML/IMS
- Improve interoperability between projects and institutions

The participants also noted that JISC may:

- Investigate funding a HE-funded projects portal, providing an overview of the past and present projects, and a mechanism to link similar projects together
- Work with senior managers to influence the culture of institutions
- Target academics to raise the awareness of JISC's role in the changing need for educational provision.

INSPIRAL's research will now concentrate on the perspectives of the learner, with forums being held in Glasgow and Leeds, information of which can be found at <http://inspiral.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/news/learnerforums06.09.01.html>.

The Final Report is due for submission to the funding body on 24.10.01 and will be widely disseminated within the education sector in November 2001.