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Innovative Learning Technology

Case Study: Nottingham Trent University Chooses Desire2Learn as Their New Learning Management System

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There are many reasons to migrate or move from one Learning Management System to another such as dissatisfaction with current solution and/or vendor, compelling capabilities of a new solution, and business drivers such as functionality, cost, usability, scalability, customer service and flexibility.

Nottingham Trent University (NTU), in August 2004, appointed the first Director of Libraries and Knowledge Resources (DLKR). It had developed a new and ambitious strategic plan for the University, for the period 2004-2010, and one of the priorities was to strengthen its use of blended and online learning across the NTU.

A managed and consistent learning environment is a key factor in the implementation of this strategy: managed for efficiency through interfaces to all enterprise systems (Human Resources, Student Records, Library, Finance, etc); and consistent (based on student feedback, which is taken very seriously in NTU's culture to strive for Gold Standard Customer Service). However, in 2004, there was no consistency of application or consistency of use across the University. An in-house developed Virtual Learning Portal (VLP) had been increasingly used since it was developed as a project system in 1998. In addition, academic staff used a variety of other systems, most notably web pages, to deliver online content to students. These applications were not a managed or consistent learning environment, with interfaces to appropriate enterprise administration and learning support systems. The VLP had been developed outside the rigours of the University's Information Systems department so there was no formal system documentation, nor a robust roadmap for future development and the staff employed to develop and support the VLP were, in the main, on year-on-year contracts of employment, reflecting the project status of the application.

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Vendor Selection

It was incumbent to establish a process by which the needs of the institution, academic staff and students, could be clearly articulated and understood, and then used for decision-making related to a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The decision to use external facilitators (Enzyme International) was taken to ensure that the process was seen to be independent as it was important from the outset to make sure that the decision-making would be transparent and as objective as possible. Enzyme International facilitated three workshops for the academic staff and three for the students on both the City and Clifton campuses. The workshop aims were to identify how academic staff and students would define a successful eLearning environment, to identify barriers to success, and to gauge the extent of participation in the existing eLearning systems in use at NTU. The facilitators used techniques that included workbooks for personal reflection, a visioning exercise to prompt definitions of success, and affinity diagrams to gather themes of the priority definitions that emerged during the workshop.

A small eLearning Project Team, chaired by the DLKR, with participation of a part-time eLearning Development Manager and VLE Support Manager, and a full-time project officer, had been established to facilitate the process. They were responsible for taking the data gathered from the workshops and turning it into an online survey that comprised a checklist of possible and desired functionality. From this it was possible to test the validity of the findings from the facilitated workshops. In conjunction with this NTU checklist of functionality, other checklists were reviewed to see if there were any important areas of functionality missing for the NTU checklist. This was to ensure that a complete picture of what was possible and desired was achieved, rather than relying on 'what we know' and risking 'what we don't know'. Respondents to the online survey were asked to rate the importance of the functionality and to identify functionality that was missing from the checklist. Over 300 staff (approximately 30% of all staff) and 2000 students (approximately 10%) completed the survey in June 2005.

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The project team collated all the results for the online survey and also commissioned the Information Systems department to develop a checklist from the technical viewpoint, so that educational and technical requirements were available. This data was shared widely by the Project Team, whose next step was to compare the checklist of functionality that was required for a 'successful virtual learning environment' with the functionality of the existing VLP. This VLE Functionality Workshop was held in July 2005. The participants in this workshop represented key VLP stakeholders who were selected because of their experience with the VLP and their knowledge of the application: the VLP system developers; the VLP super users (academic and School-based staff); and VLP support staff. Observers at the workshop were the IS Director and DLKR.

Further analysis took place in a Technical + Support Observations Workshop in August 2005. This was a difficult workshop for those involved as the data indicated that there was little agreement amongst the developers and super users as to what functionality was available, and how easy functions were to use. What would have been classed an Observation Workshop, checking the data and drawing conclusions from the facts presented, turned into a decision-making event. It was clear to the workshop participants that maintaining and re-writing the VLP was not an option, because of the problems identified above (no documentation and therefore the cost and time required to document and redevelop the VLP) and a statement from Information Systems (IS) senior management that the VLP would require a re-write to comply with future IT architectural standards.

The recommendation to go to the marketplace for a new VLE was accepted in January 2006 by the eLearning Steering Committee, a high level strategic group that had been overseeing these developments. It refocused its terms of reference to become the VLE Steering Committee. This Steering Committee was chaired by the Senior Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Development & Research) and includes Senior Management Team representation and Deans, as well as Heads of IS, Registry, the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, Educational Development Unit, two active eLearning academics, a student union representative, DLKR, Procurement

Manager, and VLE Project Manager. A Project Team was established comprising the leaders of all the evaluation phase work streams (Information Gathering and Testing, Support and Training, Migration and Data Conversion, Business Processes, Technical and Business Systems Integration, Security and Legislation, Procurement, Quality Assurance, Communication) the project manager and the DLKR, who was the Project Director.

As there had been a significant delay since the first facilitated workshops with academic staff and students held in March 2005, the Chair of the VLE Steering Committee chaired two events in September 2006 for academic staff and student union representatives, held at both the City and Clifton campuses, to confirm the critical success criteria for the VLE Project. The aim was not only to re-confirm the data previously gathered, but to remind the academic community (through open invitations to the events) that the VLE Project was moving ahead, and also re-confirming the project's strategic status within the University.

The University's requirement for a VLE was advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) in November 2006. Expressions of interest were received from 39 organisations, including a number offering support for open source solutions. Each organisation was sent a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) to ascertain whether they could, broadly, offer what was needed at NTU. Ten organisations responded to the PPQ, including a modified offering of an open source product. The four short-listed suppliers were invited to demonstrate their products. Each supplier had a day at which staff representing the four Colleges, IS, Libraries and Learning Resources and Student Support Services, to assess accessibility issues, were able to observe the various elements of functionality and evaluate the suitability or otherwise of the suppliers' systems. From February to April 2007, members of the Information Gathering and Testing Work Stream plus key IS staff visited other institutions as reference sites provided by the vendors, to inform the short-listing decision. The Project Team, after discussion with the Data Gathering and Testing Work Stream of the merits and otherwise of all four proposed systems and suppliers, decided that only two vendors would be invited to tender on the grounds that only those two products

would more closely meet the University's functional and technical requirements. A comprehensive tender specification and related documents were produced that detailed the functional, technical, support and training requirements of a VLE. Evaluation of the bids took two forms. A formal evaluation of the tender responses was completed by the Project Team and Information Gathering and Testing Work Stream. In addition, academic staff and students were given access to a hosted test system for four weeks in order to evaluate the actual functionality and ease of use of the two suppliers' products.

The Project Team planned to hold negotiation and clarification meetings with both suppliers to reach an agreed position on which a Best and Final Offer could be made (BAFO). The functional evaluation showed that one vendor was a significantly better fit for NTU's requirements. As a consequence, only one vendor was invited to attend negotiation and clarification meetings. After contract negotiations, Desire2Learn was chosen as the preferred future platform for eLearning at NTU.

System Installation and Implementation

A work plan was developed, taking into account the critical times in the academic year, so as to maximise the benefit of any communications and to inform project plans. It was important to frame communications to the academic and administrative community in terms of their 'work world' and to highlight 'what's in it for me' so that individuals could see a link between their own teaching practice and administrative duties and the possibilities of the new system.

The environment at NTU is different to when this project started in 2005. There is a much greater awareness of eLearning across the University because of the various engagement initiatives that made up this procurement process.

"The process is as important as the outcome" is a well used phrase. Pedagogically driven, not technology led, the process has taken into consideration the needs of staff and students. It has also provided a focus for reducing barriers to success that have nothing to do with the actual VLE chosen. It is not

just because of the process used to engage the community to reach a recommendation for a new VLE, but there is a mood of optimism and engagement in the academic community towards eLearning that hopefully will be sustained.

Course Migration

College Heads and Deans were briefed about migration and the process required to transfer VLP content and they accepted responsibility for making it happen. Each Dean appointed a migration coordinator, who was a person of authority within the School, to coordinate the migration. Module Leaders were responsible for the migration of 'their content', but this work could be delegated to other academic or administrative colleagues as appropriate. Migration training, as well as the basic system overview training, was offered to all academic staff, with well over 75% of staff receiving training two months before the start of the academic year. Refresher training is also offered.

The migration process developed concentrated on giving the user the ability to migrate only the content they required with a selection process for specific content and a default option to transfer all content within the main folder. Other content, such as Web Links, Reading Lists, Folder Postings, and Past Examination Papers, were optional migrations. Once the content to be migrated was picked by the academic staff and the migrate button pressed, the in-house developed application automatically wraps up that content and transfers it from the VLP to the VLE stamping the file with the same Module code as in the VLP. Thus the content is easy to find and is associated with the correct module. The migration process takes approximately 10 minutes to complete, which, when completed, enables the owner to repurpose that content with the VLE.

In Summary

Approximately 40% of those modules with VLP content have been migrated into Desire2Learn in preparation for the start of the 2009 academic year. The pedagogic functionality offered through Desire2Learn is far more advanced than the basic file 'store and share' system that was the VLP. Therefore, some academic staff chose NOT to migrate content from the VLP. They used the switch to a new eLearning platform as a chance to rethink curriculum design and delivery, using the advanced features of Desire2Learn. This was an exciting outcome of the project.

At Desire2Learn we realize that course migration is one of the biggest concerns of an institution that is selecting a new eLearning Solution. We hope that this document has assisted you by reviewing the reasons behind such a decision and the processes used by Nottingham Trent University to make such a change a reality.

Desire2Learn would be pleased to work with your institution to determine the best approach for changing Learning Management Solutions. To arrange for a Technical eLearning Consultant to contact you:

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