

JISC MLE STUDY: NORWICH SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN CASE STUDY

1. Introduction

Norwich is an independent HEI with about 1000 fte students studying for specialist and design courses, including Art and Design Foundation, HND, (About 220 students are doing FE foundation courses, of whom approximately 1/5 stay on subsequently) BA, MA or research (around 50 students are doing post grad courses). The School has no distance learners and is sited in adjacent buildings in Norwich. There are about 120 staff and the school also makes use of a large number of part-time or occasional teaching staff, including practitioners. A significant proportion of NSAD students can be characterised as 'mature students'.

NSAD has working links with neighbouring institutions, including the City College Norwich, University of East Anglia (UEA), and Anglia Polytechnic University, which validates its degree awards and, e.g., provides video conferencing functionality to the School. It is a small institution and recognises that, in many cases, it will not have the technical capacity and resources to implement solutions "in-house" and looks for support and/or commercial solutions.

The subject areas in the School include graphic design, animation, photography and web publishing etc. and there is substantial use of computer technologies for presenting portfolios etc. etc. The School is committed to and "savvy" about IT in general, and acknowledges that IT raises important questions for art and design education. Macintosh workstations are used predominantly for creative processes, with Windows computers used too, which influences some technical decision-making. Information literacy training is available to all students through a library induction course.

The School has an MLE Working Party in place, supported by TQEF¹ resources and is aiming to implement a new MLE in the 2004-05 academic year.

2. Current state of play

Academic uses

The school has invested heavily (in internal development input, including the provision of a designer and "webmaster" over the current year) in an intranet. It has been up and running since 1999, and has been growing especially in the last year. It provides:

- ?? Core information support to students on course arrangements, events etc. The intranet is, so far, used as a backup to paper copies of documents on notice boards, but respondents think that the balance is moving to the intranet information as the first and preferred port of call.
- ?? Critical Studies, which is an important course element for all students that requires access to materials and opportunities for discussion
- ?? Discussion forums for students and staff
- ?? Feedback options for students on workshops or seminars

¹ Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund

?? Exhibitions/collections of students' work, with opportunities to comment. This is growing

This has stimulated discussions of what works, and how people might want to build on the functionality. A pattern is emerging of changes in student attendance. Remote, IT-driven access and communication facilities can provide a - partial - response to this, but can also influence this trend. The use of these facilities varies. Our respondents estimated that about 50% of staff make some uses of the intranet. Most of the students do, if only for emailing, web access etc.

Access to computers is adequate, not generous. The School has about 200 computers for dedicated student use, though many are bought for the specific purposes of, and sited in areas dedicated to, graphics, photography, animation etc.

Remote access to the intranet is possible, and some students do make use of it. Mature students, an important part of NSAD's intake, have typically a low(er) level of IT literacy. This year the School has started to use an extensive questionnaire survey of new students to identify and assess strengths, weaknesses and requirements in more detail and to underpin appropriate (remedial) action.

Library

The library uses *the ALEPH* web-based library system, through a co-operative agreement with the University of East Anglia library. The introduction of this system in 02-03 has led to more use of web-based access for information retrieval.

Administration

The School has been using a student record system with a database system supplied by *Capita* (HEMIS system), with links to the invoicing and student returns. In all there are about a dozen people that regularly access this system, to update and extract information. They have also used it to produce lists for the library. This system is capable of linking to UCAS data and provides a one-way link to the financial system.

Capita are de-supporting this system so the School is looking to replace it, and increase the functionality so that student records are used to help them manage their work, including their portfolios. NSAD would welcome this as an opportunity to consider another type of solution or even another supplier, in order to progress towards a managed learning environment.

Technology

The Norwich School of Art and Design has, by its nature, a strong tradition of utilising Macs, and had experienced a rather *ad hoc* growth pattern in both acquisition and use of their computers systems until recent management restructuring. The equipment is connected using peer-to-peer protocols, without central user management.

There has been some internal funding to release staff to do work on the intranet, and it is recognised that the labour intensiveness of the work involved will continue to demand allocation of resources.

3. Drivers of MLE development

The respondents identified **teaching and learning** quality as the main driver behind establishing the MLE working group. The discussion also suggests that the moves to change the administration systems and seek **additional administrative functionality** with linkages to the academic needs are timely. Specific drivers include the requirements of the Critical Studies module, the ambition (and need) to reach out to as many students as possible. The school is also introducing a **new curriculum framework** for its undergraduate courses from 2004, with more modular structure, and seeks to introduce its MLE as part of the tooling up to manage the increased flexibility that this offers.

Some respondents mentioned their interest in using the “system” for **assessment and formal presentations** by students of their work.

Respondents made the point that the work of a School of Art and Design presents some different requirements from other institutions, for example:

- ?? The physical interaction with artefacts is essential to the studies as is the real-life interaction between learners and subject. This cannot be replaced;
- ?? They seek more flexibility such as the chance for students to make vertical and horizontal links across courses and course materials.

There also seems to be a strong driver coming simply from the need to keep on top of the technology and develop an information and communication culture in the institution. Respondents presented vignettes, for example about rapid communication with ERASMUS students, suggesting this mission.

4. Consultation and strategy development

The MLE working group (MLE WG) is widely representative, of senior management, learning support, library, administration and technical services. There is student representation.

The MLE WG has sought advice and experiences from a range of other institutions, particularly in the art and design sector (London Institute; Gray’s School of Art at Robert Gordon University).

The MLE WG has been discussing with its regional partner Anglia Polytechnic University how systems may help in the accreditation of degree work. Obviously individuals have other connections and knowledge of MLE implementations. Several people noted that the University of East Anglia, with whom the School co-operates in a Library Federation, had to work hard to get their system to work properly.

5. The future

The vision is of a future in which a unitary login provides students with access to administration, core course information, their own course profiles, learning resources, and various types of communications with tutors and peers.

The school is likely to buy a commercial product and is currently evaluating options, but has serious concerns about the licence costs for such a small institution. The school would like to see JISC making more input to their steps towards MLEs, by providing more information and by pursuing a pricing structure with commercial providers that is friendlier to small institutions.

They will implement (perhaps using a service contractor) the MLE around the administration, course management functions (for administrator, academic staff

and students). There is less drive at this stage for the presentation of teaching and learning materials, although this is seen as being a key component in the MLE.

The school made the point very starkly that a small institution can lack the technical (and financial) weight to manage the procurement, specification, installation and maintenance of software with institutional scope (and mission critical risks). There is uncertainty about the 'fit' of 'commercial' VLE platforms with the specific and to some extent a-typical needs of the Art and Design curriculum. Other strategies including the bespoke system development route chosen by Gray's School of Art are monitored, and NSAD is interested in examining and evaluating this possibility in more detail.

NSAD is proceeding towards an MLE at a sensible pace and with good understanding of its needs and the options, but with recognition that it needs to work within a wider context which is both complex and changing