

1 Introduction

Tower Hamlets College (THC) is in East London and is an FE institution combined with a Sixth Form College. It has 3000 FTE students (out of a total of 8000 – 9000 registered students). There are four main sites and the College also runs courses at community centres throughout the borough.

The Director of IT Services joined the College in 1998. On a strategic level, he became a member of the College Directorate and has been able to ensure that ILT and IT have a higher profile within the organisation than was the case prior to his appointment. The ILT Co-ordinator, a post established in 2001, is responsible for the promotion and support of ILT across the College. There is also an established system of ILT Leaders, who are responsible for ILT projects within their programme areas and act as internal champions.

At operational level, and soon after his appointment, the Director of IT Services established an MIS Intranet giving access to student information. In 1999, the College purchased WebCT in order to support teaching and to make resources available outside the college. Staff in different curriculum areas received training and became 'early adopters' and the first of the College's ILT Leaders. At the same time, in 1999, the college website was developed.

It was evident in discussion that the introduction and development of ILT and the move toward an MLE has proceeded very smoothly at THC.

2 Current State of Play

There are four main ICT areas which support the college's work:

- THC website. The public website, which gives details about the college and its courses.
- College Information System. This is an MIS, is restricted to staff and can be accessed both on and off campus. It gives access to administrative information.
- WebCT. The VLE. This is available to staff and students and is accessible both on and off campus.
- Curweb. The curriculum intranet or curriculum web. This is available to staff and students and guests and is accessible both on and off campus.

Current developments are focused on 'Curweb', a web-based curriculum tool developed in house to bridge a gap between WebCT – which has proved difficult for most teaching staff to master - and the MIS Intranet. The ILT Co-ordinating team see 'Curweb' as the heart of what they do although WebCT is used alongside 'Curweb' for certain courses.

3 Drivers of MLE Development

The following drivers underpin MLE development:

- College-wide IT/ILT Strategy.
- The ILT Leaders Programme - having teams in place to discuss issues helps the forward drive
- Key enthusiastic individuals
- Pedagogical impacts – differentiation in the classroom and “blended learning” i.e. appropriate use of technology in the classroom
- The need to create a better infrastructure for ILT progress
- Tracking student progress – for local authority monitoring requirements and evidence for inspections
- The need for accurate information and transparency
- Early adopters of ICTs - recognition by other colleges as being ahead in technology generally
- Recognition by JISC London Regional Support Centre as a ‘good practice’ institution

4 Consultation and strategy development – the process

MLE development is part of a strategic and systematic approach to IT. An IT/ILT Strategy 2003-2006 document was about to be presented to the College Board at the time of the visit. The document was prepared by the Director of IT Services and the IT/ILT Strategy Group. This group is led by the Director of IT Services, and includes the Director of Student Advocacy and Quality, Head of Programme-Learning Resources, the ILT co-ordinator and representatives from Heads of Programme.

The creation of the post of Director of Student Advocacy and Quality early in 2002 and the appointment of an experienced academic to that post are seen as milestones in the gradual process of merging IT and ILT. This post has overall responsibility for the use of ILT in teaching and learning and the ILT Co-ordinator reports to him.

For the purchase of WebCT in 1999, the selection process consisted of inviting several vendors to present their products to a group of staff – ‘people who were interested’ - along with representatives of the agents for WebCT. WebCT was the market leader at the time and was chosen as the VLE but staff has found the interface ‘clunky’ and adoption has not been widespread. Staff also had to learn how to put documents into html for transfer to WebCT and while some staff took time to learn how to do this it was recognised that this was a barrier to more widespread use. While WebCT is still in use (approximately 10% of courses use it), the interface and interoperability problems prompted the ILT Co-ordinator to begin developing an alternative system, designed to allow staff to contribute material without the need to develop specialist skills – filling in forms and clicking on a button. This development is known as ‘Curweb’, short for ‘curriculum web’.

5 Implementation process

Provision of IT equipment is at a high level. All the staff has access to PC equipment, with a machine on almost every desk. The College was an early adopter of interactive whiteboards in classrooms and there are plans to ensure that every programme area has access to at least one of those in the coming year.

There are 'IT-enabled' classrooms with 5 or 6 PCs in each and a pilot scheme using wireless laptops in maths classes, which they say has proved popular with staff and students. The College has invested in presentation equipment but hope that they have 'by-passed presentation mode' with its 'teacher-centred' approach and are focusing on 'engaging and effective lessons'.

There is a big emphasis on staff training and development, which are seen as key aspects for successful IT/ILT implementation. The College used the Teacher Pay Initiative (TPI) to encourage IT training uptake and offer both an ECDL course and an OCR Diploma which has a more specific focus of using ILT to improve teaching and learning. The first ECDL course was fully booked and is being run again in the Autumn as are two OCR Diploma courses. The College also run regular ILT days which are well attended, as well as staff development sessions throughout the year. These sessions cover a range of subjects.

The WebCT agent provided the initial training on WebCT and those staff who attended training and invested time and effort in learning how to develop html content for WebCT became the early adopters of WebCT and the first ILT leaders.

Staff reaction to the ILT initiatives has been 'mixed'. Most see value in the developments but need to see evidence of the difference it makes to learning outcomes. From the perspective of the ILT Co-ordinator, the key to progress is seen as having an ILT Leader in the team, but one or two teams have shown themselves to be reluctant adopters of ILT. Further evidence of the 'mixed' reaction to ILT came from one member of staff who said that it's easy to get carried away with the technology and asked what the impact was on student learning – 'that's the important thing'. There is an issue around sharing material and the fear that shared resources may be used in an unscrupulous way, expressed by the same individual member of staff as someone 'cheaper' such as a teaching assistant coming along and stepping into your shoes, using the material you've created.

Interesting observations were made around the impact of the ILT tools on communication, giving the tools their 'real value'. Differences in behaviour have been noted with both staff and student groups. For example, the dynamics of meetings changed when conducted via WebCT and participants' contributions differed in nature. A similar phenomenon was noted with students, with some of those who were 'typically quiet' in a conventional classroom setting becoming 'more vociferous' in online discussions. One of the interviewees also noted that there were instances of students encouraging others in online discussions, which he said was 'perhaps a more surprising finding'.

Students are encouraged to voice their opinions through online questionnaires and other issue-raising forums. There is no clear understanding of student opinion, although the absence of 'moans' was taken as endorsement and when comments had been encouraged they were positive. There was also a feeling that students who had had positive experiences with ILT assisted teaching applied pressure on staff to use similar methods.

Although the Head of Programme – Learning Resources is on the IT Strategy Group, there is very little integration of library resources and services with other ILT developments. For example, the ILT Leaders in two of the programmes spend a considerable amount of time searching for relevant resources, assessing them for quality and relevance and organising them on 'Curweb'. Library or Learning Resource skills or expertise is not utilised.

6 The future

The IT ILT Strategy emphasises the need to support the College's mission statement, which is 'removing barriers, raising achievement, for everyone'. It states that 'where appropriate, the use of ILT should be embedded across all aspects of the College, including all learners (sic) and support functions'. The Strategy document identifies twenty-four target areas for action, which represent incremental steps rather than any significant changes of direction.

The Director of IT Services is setting up a group to review the whole MLE development over the coming year. The group will consider fundamental questions such as: 'What is the point of having an MLE?' and 'What do we want from it?'. There is a question mark over the long-term viability of WebCT but there are no plans to ditch it completely. One option is to use it as a set of tools but to develop 'Curweb' as the MLE. This is seen as preferable to investing in a completely new system.