INITIATING E-LEARNING BY STEALTH IN A 'LATE MAJORITY' INSTITUTION

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Abstract

Case studies of introducing e-learning tend to focus upon universities where senior management enthusiastically supports the introduction of such an approach to learning and teaching. When such enthusiasm is not immediately forthcoming, stratagems need to be developed from the grass-roots upwards to make a convincing case to senior management that appeals to the vision the institution has of itself. We present a case study of how two managers working in a late majority university operated in stealth mode to incept an official e-learning strategy.

Introduction

There is much interest within the UK in change management. For example, the Higher Education Academy in the UK organises events to help "teams from higher education institutions develop the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm for achieving complex institutional change" (Higher Education Academy, 2006). E-learning is identified as a substantial driver for such change. There are, however, some institutions that have yet to officially embrace the technological implications of such an approach to learning and may indeed be actively hostile towards it. In such institutions, academic and support staff often elect to become change agents out of a strong sense of personal mission to their students. This paper presents a case study of the early stages of such a grass roots change programme. We believe that our experience will find resonance in many similar institutions.

Overcoming Resistance to Change via Stealth

Change can be perceived as either sustaining or disruptive (Fombrun, 1994) and the invariable response towards disruptive change is resistance. This resistance can be attributed to self-interest, lack of trust, divergent assessment of the need for change and low tolerance for change (Kotter and Schlessinger, 1979). Ethical ways to ameliorate resistance to change include education, involvement in the change, training and support. Each requires commitment of substantial resources.

When senior management is a main source of resistance, change agents need to deploy resources while operating in 'stealth mode' until sufficient managerial support can be generated. Such an approach presents change agents with a different set of challenges compared to those that exist when joining an officially sanctioned change programme and can expose them to substantial risk. However, as professionals, change agents may feel it their responsibility, in this context, to their students, to go out on an organisational limb.

The authors present a case study of how two middle managers operated in stealth mode in a university context to ameliorate senior managerial resistance to e-learning. Our goal was to incept an official e-learning consultation exercise that would pave the way for the institution to embrace e-learning as a sustaining technology. Ultimately, the volume and character of the grassroots development resulted in the university responding sufficiently positively by asking the Pro Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning to instigate a university-wide consultation process in order to generate an e-learning strategy (University of Sussex, 2006) that could then more properly provide strategic direction.

Our narrative, charting the activities employed to gain such senior consciousness is set in what Moore (1991) terms a 'late majority' institution. To explain this context and its importance, in the next section we shall introduce some relevant concepts from technological marketing before we recount our programme of activities.

Moore's Technology Adoption Life Cycle and E-Learning in HE

Moore (1991) modeled adoption of new technological products with a sequence of five categories: *innovators* are technology champions who actively sponsor and adopt emerging technologies; *early adopters* are not technology champions per se, yet they will pragmatically adopt emerging technologies to gain competitive advantage; the *early majority* is risk averse, yet understands the advantages of adopting tested technologies; the *late majority* dislikes discontinuous innovations and believes in tradition rather than progress; finally *traditionalists* rarely adopt new technologies. Figure one shows how Moore places these categories on a 'normal curve' which estimates their relative markets.

Examples of innovators, early adopters and early and late majorities for e-learning are readily identifiable within UK HE. For example, the Open University's Knowledge Media Institute is an innovator while its parent, the Open University, is simultaneously an early adopter and a member of the early majority. Crossing the chasm between the early adopters and the early majority categories are many of the 'new' universities in the UK (i.e., former polytechnics, which were granted university status in 1991). These universities perceived e-learning as a sustaining technology and over the past decade they have invested centrally in bespoke or proprietary virtual learning environments (VLEs) (Jenkins, Browne, & Walker, 2005), perceiving this as

radical business process reengineering. Within the late majority lie many of the 'old' universities who, we suggest, perceive e-learning as a disruptive technology that may divert resources from their traditional strengths, erroneously equating e-learning with distance learning and deeming it inappropriate for campus-based, research- intensive institutions. Many such universities invested in IT support for administrative practices (cf. Shurville & Williams, 2005), perceiving this as business process improvement but paid less regard to the e-learning activities that would more fully transform the enterprise.

Figure 1: Moore's technology adoption life cycle
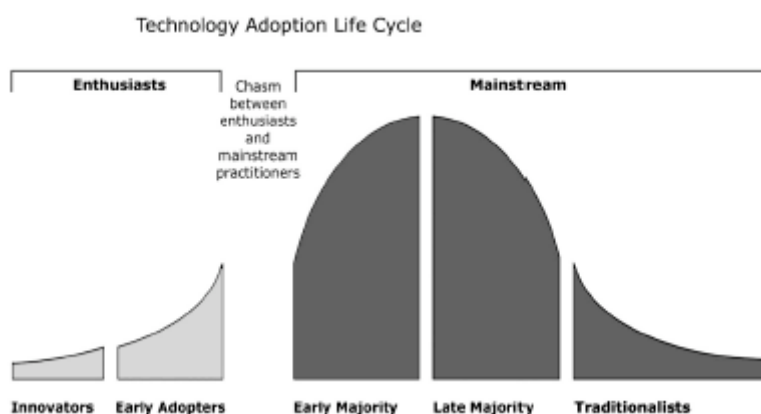
The Case Study

In 2003 the authors worked as managers within the University of Sussex, a late majority institution. Browne worked both in an academic support role, managing educational training within IT services and also in an academic role, developing and delivering several undergraduate and postgraduate degree-based courses in geographical information systems, using e-learning. Shurville directed implementation of a campus-wide managed learning environment (Shurville & Williams, 2005) and co-directed a range of undergraduate and postgraduate certificates and diplomas for City and Essex Universities, which were taught via e-learning. Our academic orientation gave us a credibility that would have been difficult to cultivate from an exclusively academic support role. It is regrettable that those who function exclusively as educational technologists, and who are often the most skilled agents for change regarding e-learning, commonly have difficulty in gaining equality of respect with academics and rarely have access to senior university committees.

We realised that change is often incepted by self-elected change agents (Revans, 1980) and decided, with some trepidation because no active university support was available, to adopt this role. We therefore set out to turn around senior managerial resistance. Our strategy was to convene a network of people who would credibly demonstrate that there was a demand for e-learning within the staff and student communities and that e-learning

was indeed compatible with the organisation's culture and resources. We nurtured this network and supported action research out of 'soft' budgets through four phases, described below. We were also able to draw upon our external formal involvements within national organisations, such as the JISC (www.jisc.ac.uk), UCISA (www.ucisa.ac.uk), and the HE Academy (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/).

Phase One: January 2002 to June 2002
In July 2001, Browne co-organised a national workshop (UCISA, 2001) with the express purpose of identifying a shared institutional perspective amongst a diverse support community of IT specialists, educational technologists, librarians, and administrators. Such staff are often the human drivers, leading e-learning initiatives within institutions, and are primarily responsible for providing and developing coherent support environments. The workshop prepared the ground for a project, led by Browne within IT Services at Sussex. The terms of reference were to evaluate the pedagogic, organisational and technical implications of developing an institutional service for a VLE. Following a brief product evaluation, a limited license was obtained for WebCT. Although it is not always possible to disentangle the two, the objective was to evaluate the usefulness of a VLE without becoming bogged down in the sterile debates that can rage around the merits of a particular product, in which the vehicle often becomes the message. Stress was placed upon the complementary use of a VLE alongside more traditional modes of learning and teaching, exploiting its 'anywhere, anytime', and 'one-stop-shop' characteristics. A local survey was also conducted to gauge the level of participatory interest.

Phase Two: Academic Year 2002/3
As phase one concluded, the senior management group funded a £500,000 programme for in-house development of an 'administrative' managed learning environment (MLE). Shurville was appointed as the project director. Despite notional reference to developing a VLE within Shurville's job description, the project was not awarded meaningful funding to research or promote an e-learning profile within the MLE. Nevertheless, somewhat surreptitiously, a VLE initiative was launched and six pilot projects identified, drawing upon the results of the survey conducted during phase one. The projects obtained some funding from the internal Teaching and Learning Development Fund (TLDF), a committee on which both authors were members. The funding helped to provide legitimacy and a university profile for the projects, which were carefully chosen to maximise the amount of information that could be extrapolated across the University, so a range of different subjects, cohorts (e.g., undergraduate/postgraduate), geographical contexts (e.g., campus/distance) and learning styles were selected. At this point the TLDF also funded the appointment of a short-term contract educational technologist to support the projects. The organisational framework to manage the projects was an Educational Technology Special Interest Group, chaired by Browne and set up by Browne and Shurville within the auspices of the MLE project. This Special Interest Group was primarily driven by senior managers from IT Services, the Library, and the Teaching and Learning Development Unit and

although it also had several enthusiastic academics, the institutional academic focus on research meant that their representation was not as great as we would have liked.

Phase Three: Academic Year 2003/4
An additional seven projects were initiated with funding from the TLDF, stimulated by awareness-raising generated from phase two. Now, at least one project existed across the range of the sciences, arts and humanities and their increasing profile eventually impacted upon the Senior Management Group, who then invited a small team to prepare an E-Learning Strategy. Significantly, this team was formed exclusively of academic-related support staff, drawn from the Special Interest Group previously mentioned. It was whilst preparing this document that the term 'late majority' began to be employed within our context, and we recognised that our institution exhibited many of the defining characteristics. One of these was reluctance by University Senior Management to make the necessary investment to enable the grass-roots, almost organically developed e-learning activity to develop further. The potential cost of such investment, and the uncertainty regarding its appropriateness within a research-led and substantially campus-based university were significant inhibitors.

Phase Four: Handing Over to the Pro Vice Chancellor
By the end of phase three, grass roots demand for e-learning support from academics had grown to a point where we were unable to support further growth via soft funding and personal over-commitment. Fortunately, at this point a change of pro vice chancellor for teaching and learning meant that we were able to pass the torch to a sympathetic senior manager, who built upon the previous initiatives by establishing an official E-learning Advisory Group and a consultation exercise. The E-learning Advisory Group ultimately generated a university wide e-learning strategy (Luckin, 2005; University of Sussex, 2006).

Lessons Learned

We consider that three critical success factors helped us to make progress incepting e-learning within a late majority institution. First, holding a variety of internal and external academic, managerial and technical roles meant that as change agents we were credible to academics, managers and technical staff. Second, fostering a collegiate approach helped to build a motivated network of academics and influential managers who reached an evidence-based consensus before senior management asked their searching questions. Third, ensuring that all of our 'stealthy' activities were legitimately funded and took place within the auspices of established projects meant that out activities were transparent, which safeguarded our own ethical position. The common thread here is the importance of legitimate networking within the university and the wider community. For this reason we believe that professional development of academic related staff and mangers through publication and presentation at conferences such as this continues to pay substantial dividends for HE.

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