EDITORIAL

Common principles in managing digital libraries and managing VLEs

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Abstract

Purpose – To illustrate how there are common ways of managing both digital libraries and VLEs (virtual learning environments), based on the concept-in-common of a devolved or centralised approach to their implementation and a devolved or centralised long-term management structure for their service development.

Design/methodology/approach – A simple overview of the principles involved, combined with comments on how the UK CLA (Copyright Licensing Agency) Higher Education scanning licence could be implemented in terms of these principles.

Findings – That the intrinsic natures of VLE and digital library IT platforms do lend themselves more easily to certain styles of management and implementation, but that the temptation to do what is administratively easiest, or most convenient in IT support terms, should not dictate the pedagogy informing the use of these platforms.

Research limitations/implications – The relevance of these findings will be shown by the shape of future co-ordinated developments in combined VLE and digital library initiatives and by the impact of applied learning theories on those activities.

Practical implications – Suggests that the library profession must be fully informed about the impact of learning theory on practical digital library implementations and must explore a new professional role which includes the functions of educator and educationalist.

Originality/value – The paper gives some solid foundations on which to base an understanding of the impact of new digitisation licence arrangements on UK HE library practice.

Keywords Digital libraries, Virtual organizations, Learning, Information services, Library management

Paper type Viewpoint

When looked at from a particular slant, large libraries may sometimes appear to be monolithic, centralised organisations who do not respond readily to the particular and individual demands of users. Wherever a significant library service sits within a bigger organisation there can be a tension between users outside the library who desire a greater degree of ownership and control over the service offered to them, and the need to run a centralised system with good economies of scale and bureaucratically efficient procedures.

Yet the choice between devolved and centralised forms of service delivery does not just affect libraries. The recent introduction of IT-based platforms for delivering e-learning in Higher Education has also highlighted just this sort of opposition between two distinct approaches. On the one hand, traditional learning had always been a highly devolved affair, not just in universities: the teacher in the classroom or lecture room has always had local control over their teaching, enjoying the creative and highly personal interactions of face-to-face educational contact [in spite of recent government-led reforms in the UK and elsewhere which, to the chagrin of those on all

sides of educational politics, have tried to standardise and micromanage most aspects of educational experience at all levels[1] (Clifton, 2001; Tate and Clark, 2002)].

But on the other hand, a single electronic system for delivering learning makes standardisation and control much more feasible – it is a small step from a *virtual* learning environment to a *managed* learning environment, and it is interesting how the two terms came into currency more or less simultaneously (Harris, 2001). The distinction between a VLE and an MLE was soon noted by university academics, who would ward off managerialist attempts to control their creative teaching activity by saying "I'm happy to teach on an electronic platform, purely because of the great new capabilities of virtual media – just don't use these platforms as a means of managing me, telling me how to do my teaching when I know better." In view of these reactions from teaching staff, it is not surprising that you hear the term VLE more than MLE these days!

In spite of the "big brother-ish" potential of virtual learning platforms, much of their implementation in the Higher Education context has been highly flexible and highly devolved. Although universities will often commit to a big central VLE package such as WebCT, Blackboard or Moodle, the individual teacher or teaching department is still very much free to plough their own furrow, choosing rival Learning Environment packages or simply teaching the good old-fashioned way, by talking and listening to students face to face. Even where departments decide to use the central institutional VLE, the way they use it is, in practice, highly devolved. Although a central VLE unit may give a certain level of core support to what individuals lecturers do, the local departmental IT guru will probably be the main regular source of immediate technical advice, while the pedagogy adopted by academic staff remains their own preserve (and rightly so).

So traditionally based teaching is highly devolved, while centrally administered virtual learning technology platforms can create a momentum towards central control. Where there is a preference among academic staff to retain devolved control of teaching, control does indeed remain devolved, even in the context of a virtual learning environment, and the supporting administrative structure underpinning the institutional VLE develops along a similarly devolved pattern. Therefore the intrinsic nature of the electronic medium does not dictate the pattern of use: the user dictates to the medium how it should be used.

Ironically, the reverse applies to traditional patterns of library management. Whereas traditional library services are frequently highly centralised (e.g. in many UK HEIs with sizeable main libraries with big economies of scale and a bias against devolved departmental collections), the advent of virtual information services has had a tendency to offer devolved control of information flow to departments. The power of networks have given academics and students the ability to access whatever online information service is the most appropriate for their needs – Google being the chief network competitor for the loyalty of users who once had no better friend than the large main library collection.

But again, large main libraries remain in many ways the prime supplier of information services to their users. Certainly there has been a degree of leakage of service away from libraries to new network competitors, but the electronic information flow to any large organisation (be it a university or company) from the main digital portal delivered by its central library or information service remains of prime importance to that organisation. One can only suppose that both central library services and devolved teaching structures, defy the pull of electronic media towards

their opposite (devolved information services and centrally managed and delivered teaching) because users prefer the established form of existing services. There may be a degree of inertia in this set of preferences, but as a practitioner librarian in a large central university library, I like to think it is mainly because our centralised model has given users good service. So again, the intrinsic nature of the electronic medium does not dictate the pattern of use: the user dictates to the medium how it should be used.

But now we have a new development in electronic information provision which raises fresh questions about how we determine the balance between central and devolved administration of learning and information services in education today. The UK CLA (Copy Right Licensing Agency) HE scanning licence is a legal document which creates a framework for the digitisation of hardcopy originals to a degree that exceeds the prohibitive restrictions of the existing UK copyright act. Such licences have emerged previously elsewhere (e.g. in Australia), but in the UK this is something that we have not benefited from to date.

The CLA is of course not an educational or research body – it is primarily an administrative body concerned with ensuring just rewards for intellectual property holders. And administrative efficiency per se tends to favour a centralised approach to managing any process. The CLA licence therefore tends to dictate a centralised approach to its implementation: it asks for a regular single institutional return of the digitisation activity performed under its auspices, including a single, central record of materials digitised *de novo* where commercial equivalents already exist, together with the reason for not choosing to purchase the pre-existing commercial version.

Similarly, the auditing of digital rights management processes upon which the licence is predicated is more easily dealt with by means of a single, central institutional rights management system rather than a devolved structure where individual departments might make their own records of rights and permissions, which in some rather unwieldy way could then be amalgamated into a single, campus-wide auditable return.

As one academic in Scotland has of the CLA licence, "This licence has just got *central library* written all over it" (and I am not if that was a complaint or just a statement of fact – so again, let us take it as a compliment to librarians' centralising efficiency). However, the fact that the licence demands that digitised readings are only made available to members of a class for whom a reading list is provided could be taken to imply something else – it may imply that the licence has "VLE" rather than "library" written all over it, since VLE software alone can control digital access at the class level.

So here is the paradox – the centralised procedures implicit in the licence tend to dictate a "main library" approach to its implementation. The electronic controls demanded by the licence tend to invoke the similar, central management functionality of a VLE IT platform. Yet we know that academics want to use VLEs in a highly devolved way, safeguarding the control and the "specialness" of the lecturer–learner relationship not least because the pedagogy underpinning effective e-learning emphasises empowering the learner rather than teaching the taught in a "transmissive" mode of education (which is more easily done against the background of a centrally ordained prescriptive syllabus which is then embodied by a centrally provided narrow list of core reading materials).

Some aspects of library provision are highly supportive of independent learning and a self-directed student approach to education (e.g. database searching on a range of electronic services that let the student choose and dictate the information content of

their project-based learning). However, other aspects of library services support a transmissive model of teaching – above all the short loan collection, from which a prescribed, essential set of recommended readings can be spoon-fed to students.

The CLA licence tends to reinforce the transmissive model of education in that the easiest way to implement its provisions would be to regard it as a method of transforming a print collection of recommended readings into a digital library of those same recommended readings. This would be a directly converted virtual short loan collection (although the "shortness" of the loan may be a thing of the past once free simultaneous network access to a reading for a whole class becomes possible).

There is nothing wrong with digital spoon feeding, but it would a great shame if the administrative structures implicit in the licence dictated a transmissive pedagogy as embodied by the central library short loan collection rather than the exploratory and self-directed learning embodied in true creative e-learning. This is the pedagogy that we see represented by the best teaching packages which are individually created by academics in devolved e-learning activities.

But it is reassuring to note that what history teaches us is this – that the medium is not necessarily the message, and that users can dictate the use of the medium rather than being dictated to by the seemingly "intrinsic" nature of any information medium. Just as lecturers choose to use a central library but also a devolved VLE service, so should they choose to use the CLA licence in whatever fashion strikes them as appropriate – that is in as individual and creative a way as possible, not just as a means of recreating the central library student reading collection. The fact that the provisions of the licence would tend to militate against this flexibility is a problem but not an insuperable one.

Thus, once this intrinsic bias in implementing the licence is realised, we should strive against this tendency and use the licence for the style of education which workers in education think best suits the twenty first century educational environment. Librarians as a group are in a good position to support this flexible approach – but to do so they must realise the interrelated nature of information science and learning theory, and work as both information provider and educationalist. This is yet another challenge for today's digital librarians. But we have already created an impressive recent tradition of understanding and achievement in this area (Currier *et al.,* 2001; Markland, 2002) – we must therefore build on this tradition to help digitised library collections become essential tools in the e-learning environments of contemporary educational systems.

Note

1. Sheerman, B. (2003), [Labour MP and Chairman of the Commons Education Select Committee] "Finally, on micromanagement [of Higher education], *there is always a tendency for governments to micromanage* and we said clearly what many Hon. Members on both sides of the House tend not to want to hear. They deny that they are keen on micromanagement, but some would say that the access regulator is an example of micromanagement. *It suggests that the universities cannot be trusted…*" [editor's italics], available at: www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?gid=2003-09-18.318.3.

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