

Influencing capital in an education institution

UKSG eNews 454

4 October 2019

Elizabeth Charles, University of London

I am an Assistant Director of Library Services at Birkbeck, University of London, where I have worked for more than fifteen years, in different roles culminating in this current position. My areas of responsibilities are e-services, (digitisation services, e licences and subscriptions) library systems (LMS, institutional repository, digital images and research data management) and collections (acquisition and metadata). Throughout my career at Birkbeck, I have worked closely with the Birkbeck Information Technology Services in the deployment of virtual learning environments (VLE) (Web CT, Blackboard and most recently Moodle) and the digital learning tools provided for teaching and teachers.

In the last six-plus years I have become more interested and involved in learning technology and how this can enrich/transform teaching and in the library information literacy sessions. This has resulted in me becoming a Certified Member of the Association for Learning Technology (CMALT), the first person at Birkbeck University to achieve this and currently, I am a Trustee of the Association for Learning Technology.

My interest therefore in technology-enhanced learning was inevitable. As the use of VLEs has become prevalent in academia, I was well aware that as much as lecturers might wish to maximise the use of the learning technologies supplied, without training and support and due to pressure of time, limited take-up would be achieved. This resulted with the VLE being used as a repository, rather than as an interactive digital teaching/learning space.

How do you go about instigating an institutional change when you are in the professional services and the change required is not in your department? How do you acquire the necessary power to authorise that change? This is how I did both those things in 2016/17 and used my influencing capital for the good of the institution.

The beginning

At the networking session of the annual master's address to professional services staff, I had a quick chat with Professor David Latchman about the lack of support being provided to academics to develop the use of digital space at Birkbeck. His talk had mentioned the development of the physical estate, but nothing about the digital space. He suggested I send him an email as I was so concerned about this issue.

Having been presented with an opportunity to talk further about this issue, I was not going to let it pass. For a couple of days – if not a week – I thought about what to include in this email during my



commute to and from work. I then wrote a draft email and returned to it to ensure it was factual, had the right tone and was clear why I thought there needed to be learning technologists supporting academics to adopt relevant learning technology, to deliver their content and adapt the teaching practice in the digital space (VLE). I sent the email and went on with my job. A few weeks later the Director of Library Services returned from another presentation by David, who had been looking for me. I was informed that David had said yes, the idea had merit, but it needed to be investigated further so I should set up a steering group to do this. It would need an academic lead as this was an academic institution. I was not expecting that!

From idea to reality

Having been given the authority to do so, I started to identify academics that I had worked with who had a similar interest in the adoption of technology and had been representatives on such working groups in the past, focusing on the digital space and technology. I spoke to these colleagues individually and informally about what I hoped to achieve with this steering group. Along with a colleague from Information Technology Services, we started to decide the scope and resources that would be needed to do this. We decided to have two academics to be co-chairs of the steering group. My colleague from IT Services and I spoke to external experts and asked if they would be willing to contribute to the fact-finding, horizon scanning and who should be interviewed. These informal chats and coffees were followed by formal emails to colleagues, requesting confirmation of their willingness to take part. I also met with the Director of Information Technology Services to clarify why I was pushing on this and that this was not a reflection on existing staff, as we needed more staff to deliver this support.

With the personnel of the group sorted I wrote to David, copying in the Pro-Vice Master for Education, as I was aware that there might be overlap with the recommendations of the internal Student Experience Review Report that had taken place after our submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework. Issues around technology and its use and support was a common theme both from students and staff focus groups. And so it proved to be the case, with the suggestion that this steering group now accommodate one of the strands of the Student Experience Review Report recommendations, looking and addressing the pain-points in current use of information technology.

Practicalities

The first meeting of all the relevant key stakeholders was not promising. In informal discussions about the size and dynamics of the group and the time constraints, it was decided that there should be two much smaller working groups: one looking internally at existing practice and the other horizon scanning at what others were doing and how this was supported. My two co-chairs would each lead a smaller group and I would be on both groups as would the Director of Information Technology Services (ITS) and other ITS representatives. During seven to eight weeks, both groups met on three occasions and outside of these meetings focus groups with students and staff took place, a survey of usage of resources was collated and we interviewed experts and heads of departments in other institutions about their set-up and structures and consulted surveys on the learning technology sector. I called on both my professional and personal learning networks and colleagues I knew in the Association for Learning Technology. The findings and recommendations were produced into a single 64 page report that covered both existing pain-points and how to address these and an ambitious recommendation for resources to be made available, ie new staff required and a way of working to support academics and enable the future development of the VLE as a teaching and learning community space for staff and students.

Outside of the meetings, I met frequently with the chairs of the two groups and ITS colleagues and over coffee discussed progress, road bumps, how to get around these and next steps. It was an interesting and collaborative way of working that I had not experienced before. Indeed, one of the first drafts of one of the working group's report was produced writing collaboratively with all of us chipping in at the same time. The time constraint kept us to the task. At the second meeting that all key stakeholders of the steering group attended, the two reports from the two smaller working

groups were individually presented with findings and recommendations that were then discussed. The last job of my co-chairs was to amalgamate the two reports, and this was then submitted to go to the Student Experience Review Operational Management Group.

Outcomes

I achieved what I set out to do and was given the authority to use the institution's structure to deliver change. Most of the short-term recommendations have been adopted and a Head of Digital Education post was advertised and filled, and we are currently recruiting for three new learning technologists. The rest of the recommendations in the report can be used as a starting point for setting strategic objectives for the coming years and should act as a source of insight for the new Head of Digital Education. Issues about the look and feel of Moodle have been addressed and there is now an integrated approach to what and where students can access relevant information about their course. There is now a consistent route for communicating with students and signposting support resources and services. The need for a more uniform arrangement of Moodle modules, to help with navigation and addressing the pain-points that students and staff have identified, will be an ongoing programme of development. A new Digital Education subcommittee was created which reports to the Education Committee. This will have representation from each School's departments, and I will represent the library. Having such a subcommittee indicates the importance of this area of teaching and learning for Birkbeck, no longer seen as an afterthought. It will ensure that goals and objectives arising from this subcommittee will be accountable for implementation and reporting on the progress made regarding uptake by staff, as this area develops and becomes embedded in educational practice and in delivering blended learning, one of Birkbeck's strategic goals.

Lessons learnt

I learnt a great deal about myself and the influence that I wasn't even aware that I had. When I initially approached the two co-chairs, I was pleasantly surprised that they were willing to come on board. It helped that I was articulating an issue that they were very aware of but could not fix at a local level. My confidence to see this through came from my growing knowledge of learning technology and my involvement in the Association for Learning Technology, where I am a CMALT Lead Assessor and a Trustee.

Leading from the side is something I do with my direct reports in the library. However, in this situation, I was present where the discussions and decisions of what to do, how it should be done and by whom, took place. A much more testing situation for me, where you contribute to the whole without always demanding that things be done your way. I had to let go control and accept that though the approach may be different from what I might have done, the goal was the same and we would and did get there, in the end. Both chairs had very different styles arising from their different disciplines (film, media studies and geospatial information systems). Looking back, this worked to our advantage and I do not think we would have had such a comprehensive report without this.

In the time frame we had there was a great deal of communication, emails, face-to-face and liaising with individuals and groups and negotiating what was within the purview of the groups and what was not and influencing the focus. Actively listening to what was being articulated and pulling together the common threads was key. Observing the group dynamics and where necessary vocally supporting approaches/ideas put forward that I thought would keep us on track resulted in lively meetings. Underlying the two groups' work was the conviction that we wanted this report to be a roadmap that, irrespective of current issues, when adopted would see progress and transformation of how digital technologies and the digital space could and would be used at Birkbeck.

My working relationships with the co-chairs and some of the Steering Group members have been of long and fruitful duration and the opportunity to address support needs that would help them in their teaching was a good match. My professional profile has risen in the institution and I have more awareness of initiatives being undertaken at Birkbeck, and where relevant I feel more empowered to contribute, with knowledge, information or putting individuals in contact with staff outside of the

institution. It was a strange position to be in where you are the reason that something is being undertaken but because you are not an academic you cannot lead it. Such is the bind being in the professional services in an academic institution. My take on this was if the issue was finally being addressed it didn't matter that I could not officially lead the initiative, as I did so in many unofficial ways, and the report and its findings are being acted upon.

Having now gained this influencing capital as somebody who can get things done, I have used this recently to ensure that information/digital literacy input from the library is embedded in the foundation years of degrees. This is something I would have raised anyway with the academic lead on this, but having the experience of those two groups to call on made it much easier to reach out with a chat over coffee. Influencing capital for me is using my influence to create opportunities to bring like-minded colleagues across the institution together, to address ongoing issue/gaps in services/support that will result in an improved student experience and supported teaching and professional services staff.

I would do it again if the situation arose. My question to you is, would you be willing to?

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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