Aims & Objectives

The aims and objectives of this implementation were not clear-cut as different participants appeared to have different underlying objectives. The head of Department was keen to establish a Departmental IT Strategy before a key member of the academic staff left the department. That key academic saw my possible intervention as an opportunity to further the integration of Learning Technology (LT) into the Department’s teaching - a long term campaign. Another member of staff was keen to obtain further information on the learning technology possibilities for their courses. Similarly the motivation to increase the use of learning technology was not homogeneous. Teaching quality was high in the mind of the Department and this case spanned the period of Quality Assurance Ratings within Accounting & Finance. Effective use of resources also appeared to be a motivation.

Following initial contacts, I went to the Department aiming to increase staff awareness of the materials available in the subject discipline and to introduce some of the more sceptical members of the academic staff to the benefits of integrating learning technology into their teaching. I hoped that those new to learning technology would start to introduce appropriate applications into their own teaching and be more responsive to others’ use of learning technology.

The foci of the implementation were:
- Departmental policy
- staff attitudes
- knowledge of the LT materials available
- how LT resources might be used.

Overview

Like many Departments the academic staff included a small number of IT/LT enthusiasts. The majority of the remainder of the staff were sceptical, with some undertones of actual hostility to the use of IT/LT.

At the time of the LTDI intervention the Department was in the process of determining a Departmental IT strategy. The Department’s most enthusiastic user of learning technology in the curriculum was in process of drafting this policy, which was to be discussed by the Department before they left to take up a post in another institution. This individual was one of my prime contacts in the department, the other being a relatively new lecturer in the department. It may be relevant that the academic community of Accounting & Finance in Scotland is relatively small and I have known a large proportion of the academics in this department for several years.

The principal intervention was a 1 day visit, involving detailed interviews with four of the academics identified as the most sceptical of the benefits of learning technology in the curriculum, the presentation of a seminar on the integration of learning technology into teaching and a demonstration of some of the learning technology materials available. Additionally I had several informal meetings and other communications with my two prime contacts in the Department, both before and after the visit.

The main implementation issues addressed in this case where:
- Why use LT in your teaching?
- The importance of integration;
- The role of computers in assessment;
- Identification of potential LT materials for individuals’ courses.
Outcomes
The visit took place towards the end of the 1995/96 session. At the time of writing (July '96) there has not been much time for action, and no teaching has yet been affected. However, enquiries indicate that there have been outcomes.

• Over half the Department have indicated an increased willingness to use LT in their own teaching.

• The department has adopted an IT strategy including substantive agreement on the role of computer based assessment within the department’s curriculum.

• Several LT packages and/or resources have been identified for inclusion in courses, resulting in several bids for inclusion in the Department’s LT grant application to the University. The widening of the debate about which items should be given priority in this funding application is indicative of an increased interest in using LT.

• There has been increased use of the WWW to provide course / learning resources for students.

• There have been instances of new uses of spreadsheets as a learning tool.

• There is interest in using LT materials to reduce the Department’s reliance on other departments to teach elements of the degree curricula.

• Consideration is being given to using some of the identified LT materials to supplant some of the extant service teaching in the longer term.

• In the short term LT materials will be made available to supplement the teaching of statistics and economics.

• There is an improved awareness of the potential role of LT in the teaching of the department and its effects on student learning and motivation.

It is of course too early to see an outcome in the terms of changes in courses and teaching - but the commitment to and interest in change is heartening.

Conclusion
It is of course impossible to disentangle the effect of the LTDI intervention from all of the other pressures and flows within and upon the department. The outcomes noted above are evidence of an increased awareness and interest in learning technology within the department, but there appear to be additional, more general observations that can be made.

One of the lessons is that demonstrations of what can be done with learning technology together with a realistic approach to the problems and advantages of using learning technology can “win over” even some of the most sceptical. Learning technology will not solve all of our teaching problems but it does present us with innovative teaching opportunities and our students with different forms of learning experiences. Some of the interviewees within the Department were NOT willing subjects, having been cudgelled into talking to me about learning technology. A position made worse at a personal level because of my existing relationships with them in other roles. Despite this initial reluctance, all of these individuals have shown an interest in increasing their use of learning technology. Of course time may show some of this interest to be tactical - because of the head of department’s support. We can however hope that even if this is the case their use of learning technology will foster and enhance their interest in this area.

Within this case I believe that an important element in the turning of sceptics may have arisen from the emphasis on learning rather than advocating learning technology as being “more efficient”. The integration of learning technology may increase the efficiency /effectiveness of teaching in the long term but the reasons for change can have more to do with improving the quality of student learning and increasing our interest in our own teaching methods and style. Further, we need, perhaps, to empathise more with our students, thereby enhancing their motivation to learn. Our reactions to “gimmicks” may well be very different from that of our students!

Finally, for me, some of the outcomes were surprising. I did not expect to “descepticise” the sceptics, though I did hope to. Only time will tell of the “real” impact but the signs are encouraging - so far!