Morley and Rose Bruford Colleges: Cross-sector peer review as a driver for VLE development and beyond

Summary

The peer review process between Morley College and Rose Bruford grew out of separate discussions with both institutions and Jisc RSC London in 2011 during which Jisc RSC advisors, Evan Dickerson and Martin Sepion, identified common features in the two institutions including their size, subject specialisms and stage of VLE development. In addition, in both Colleges the Moodle sites are managed by single members of staff with roles and responsibilities encompassing the full spectrum of administration, training, support and promotion. Both David Matthews (Rose Bruford) and Laurence Elliott (Morley College) saw a peer review as an opportunity to share best practice and act as a critical friend to a colleague.

About Morley and Rose Bruford Colleges

Morley College is located a short walk from Waterloo Station and has a distinguished history in adult education dating back to the 1880s. The College specialises in provision for Visual and Performing Arts, Health and Exercise, Languages and Humanities. Provision ranges from short courses of less than five weeks to programmes of two years duration, most of which are non-accredited and go from Entry Level to Level 3. Many of the college’s tutors are high profile practitioners in their own fields, particularly in the areas of Health and the Arts.

Rose Bruford College was founded in 1951 and is a specialist HEI drama school in Sidcup, south east London. Its 900 students and a faculty of professionally active academics are organised into two schools (The School of Performance and The School of Design, Management & Technical Arts), offering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. With a long tradition of innovative work, Rose Bruford specialises in looking at theatre and performance from a range of cultural and artistic perspectives, and in preparing students from a wide range of backgrounds for work in the professional theatre and related creative industries.
The challenge

Morley College has a wide range of curriculum areas but also a strong performing arts heritage, with Drama being an early adopter of Moodle. Along with Rose Bruford, Morley relies considerably on Jisc RSC London for support and strategic input.

“The peer review process presented an opportunity to further extend this input by identifying the successful strategies used by our partner institution. In particular we were aware of the need to develop use of Moodle's more interactive features.”

Laurence Elliott, VLE Manager at Morley College

Challenges faced by Morley are similar to those experienced by many Adult and Community Learning (ACL) providers, including a large number of practitioners on part-time/hourly paid contracts with wide ranging levels of IT skills. This has slowed the adoption of the Moodle VLE and increased the need for considerable individual support. Section heads have taken the lead in Moodle development but as fractional members of staff themselves, have limited time to develop and promote ILT.

Rose Bruford College’s Moodle went live in 2010. The college is a dedicated performing arts HEI. VLE staffing at Bruford, currently, is a single 0.5 FTE position. As such, they have drawn heavily on the advice and support of Jisc RSC London, who suggested that a peer review would be of significant value. The challenge of teaching performing arts using a VLE has provided fruitful ground for discussion and sharing of best practice. The peer review process has also provided technical and pedagogical feedback which previous in-house audits, e.g. focusing on security, business-case and so on, could not.

General challenges associated with VLE rollout such as staff buy-in and student induction, have also featured in the reviews alongside more technical areas, for example hosting, plug-ins and MIS systems integration.

“Jisc RSC London has provided us with a significant amount of support through the process. Without its considerable input, Morley College would not have been identified as a partner. Jisc’s knowledge of both institutions has helped make this a very successful match.”

Andrew Walker, Vice Principal of Rose Bruford

The activity

Phase I of the peer-review took place in 2012 with a review of the two institutional Moodle sites. The process initially focused on technology, including rollout, usage and technical challenges. Morley College visited Rose Bruford in January 2012 accompanied by Martin Sepion, RSC London. A follow up visit by Rose Bruford to Morley College took place in June 2012. To inform discussion and the review process, prior access to partner VLEs was also organised. Both VLE Managers also had access to recent user surveys. As the peer review reports were based on a single face-to-face meeting, the provision of information beforehand was particularly important.
The participants approached the process without a specific methodology in mind. However, in practice the process adopted was closest to the “walk-through” peer review method; a conversation designed to draw out constructive criticism. Reports were tailored to the particular concerns of the partner organisation with the views expressed in them made as part of a peer development process rather than an assessment of performance. At the draft stage of report writing, clarification was provided via email exchange to ensure that the documents supported the internal requirements of the organisations.

The outcomes

The Morley-produced peer-review has been received by Rose Bruford’s VLE Working Party and the Learning Quality and Standards Committee which reports to the Senior Management Committee. It is one of the key working documents which informed the rewriting of the 2012/13 VLE Action Plan, which forms part of the Rose Bruford’s institutional VLE Strategy for 2011/14.

The report produced by Rose Bruford for Morley has been received by the Deputy Principal (Curriculum and Quality) and all curriculum area managers. It has been a primary reference for the 2012/13 Music & Drama Development Plan. Whilst its main focus was on the use of Moodle in performing arts, the report contained wider lessons which have informed other departmental development plans. It has also been circulated to members of the Governing Body with a particular interest in embedding technology in the curriculum, including the Chair of Quality and Standards Committee.
Knowledge sharing developed in parallel with the peer review around a number of areas, including mobile learning, MIS integration and e-portfolios. Both managers are undertaking PRINCE2 training and have discussed tailoring the methodology to smaller scale projects and environments. Reciprocal feedback on plans, reports and papers has also been provided. At David Matthews’ request, Morley staff are sharing lessons from their on-going Moodle/MIS integration process. Underlying this extended collaboration has been the opportunity for two organisations with different strengths and perspectives to fill gaps in each other’s expertise and experience. Further opportunities for collaboration outside the peer review process have been identified and are under discussion.

“As a result of the success of the partnership with Morley College, we are planning a second-phase peer review, with a focus on exploring innovation. We are excited about the possibilities such a review may yield.”

Andrew Walker, Vice Principal of Rose Bruford

“The peer review process has led to a productive, frequent, on-going and much appreciated working dialogue with my colleague at Morley.”

David Matthews, VLE Manager at Rose Bruford

The impact

The peer review is linked to a number of agendas in both institutions including curriculum, quality, widening participation, business (developing new revenue streams etc.) and ILT. Outputs from the process are a continuing point of reference.
for on-going development of VLEs within both Rose Bruford and Morley College. The peer review process itself has become a model for future collaboration around ILT. This collaboration, which is now described as Phase 1 and focused on the roll-out and development of Moodle, is being followed in 2012/13 by a Phase 2. The Phase 2 review will focus on pedagogy, including changes to the teaching and learning culture, and embedding blended learning.

Future plans

Preparation for the next Peer Review has consisted of shared visits, video conferencing and other communication between the two VLE managers. The second phase will again be employing the ‘walkthrough’ methodology. Once data gathering is completed using online benchmarking surveys, the results will be used to firm up aims and objectives for review activities. Focus groups will then be identified and workshops programmed between the institutions. Focus groups for Phase 2 are likely to involve a wider cross-section of staff, including SMT and potentially learners and with face to face contact supplemented with online conferencing. It is expected that the Jisc RSC London will be involved in facilitation of these events.

"We have found the peer review process to be particularly beneficial: the opportunity to have input from partners in a different sector has been especially refreshing."
Andrew Walker, Vice Principal of Rose Bruford

“I think the peer review process has brought many more benefits than any of the participants had originally anticipated. An indicator of its success is that we now are now preparing for a second phase which broadens out the process beyond Moodle.”
Laurence Elliott, VLE Manager at Morley College

Useful links

Morley College website
Rose Bruford College website

Links to related case studies

Using web 2.0 tools to develop and support a multi-campus class

Disclaimer

Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.