

The Visual Learning Lab at five years - enthusiasm, engagement and lots of hard work!

Sarah Kerr (Communications Consultant for the Visual Learning Lab) reports on the launch of the Visual Learning Lab's *A Showcase of Innovations in Visual Learning* publication.

Professor Roger Murphy, VLL Director says that "this report provides a fantastic range of insight into some of the very best outcomes of the VLL's collaboration".

As the CETLs enter their final year, the Visual Learning Lab team have published – *A Showcase of Innovations in Visual Learning* – designed to illustrate some of the most striking innovations in visual learning approaches from across the University. The work undertaken is un-doubtedly helping to create root and branch change in how students access and experience learning across the University. This article looks at a few examples of best practice included in the Showcase.

Diverse projects, diverse disciplines, common outcomes

In preparation for the report, Sarah Kerr spoke to colleagues from all five faculties to ascertain how far the learning and teaching challenges they were facing have been met by investment in visual technologies and associated research. What she found was that despite the very wide range of projects undertaken and technologies installed, there were certain key outcomes that were common to many projects:



- the positive impact of technologies on group-work and a wide range of other transferable skills such as communications, decision-making and leadership;
- the enjoyment students get out of the creative challenges involved with technology use;
- the value of visualisation on linking theory to practice;
- the transferability of the technologies used in different Departments;
- the specific value of videoconferencing in linking students to professional practice settings in vocational courses such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy, teaching, and veterinary education;
- the value of the various RLOs (reusable learning objects) such as digital

image archives and online tutorial material for future generations of students.

Dr Rolf Wiesemes, the Senior Research Fellow for the VLL observes how – through shared technologies used in different areas – ‘academics from a wide range of disciplines started to communicate about their teaching and key issues in implementing visual technologies in their work. In this regard, the various projects triggered



informal networks across faculties and across discipline areas. This enabled more wide ranging conversations about visual learning and teaching with technologies.'

The Showcase describes 24 different examples of good practice (see maps on page 15). Here are three that we think epitomise the enthusiasm, engagement and hard work invested in visual learning innovation by staff at the University over the past five years, and most importantly, the incredible teaching and learning gains that evidence-based integration of visual technologies has helped to effect.

School of Nursing – The Clinical Practice Teaching and Learning Observatory links students to live clinical settings

Building on the work of Dr Do Coyle (Professor of Learning Innovation at the University of Aberdeen, ex-Co Director of the Visual Learning Lab) in using videoconferencing to link students to professional practice, Dr Brenda Rush and colleagues from the School of Nursing used videoconferencing technology to link nursing students to clinical practice settings. The students had a lecture on the biological basis of diabetes and then linked with a live clinic via videoconferencing technology. It would have been impossible for all the students to have physically attended the clinic. However, using the technology meant that all sixteen students in the classroom in Nottingham could observe and converse with the four patients and specialist diabetes nurse in the clinic. The students could ask questions of the patients and the nurse and feedback from both sides was very positive. They saw it as a 'respectful and

ethical way of learning' and a 'fantastic real-life experience'. In her final report to the Visual Learning Lab, Dr Rush commented that the impact of this innovation, and other uses of videoconferencing to make teaching delivery more efficient, had been well-received: "Staff who had adapted their teaching style found videoconferencing to be a useful tool in their repertoire of skills to link students across centres or with clinical placements".

School of Geography – video-making increases enjoyment and investment in learning

Staff and students alike involved with the VLL tell us that if they are enjoying teaching/learning, they get more out of the process. Professor Michèle Clarke has been using this to both her and her students' advantage in the School of Geography. Students had access to new video-editing facilities to help them submit video-work as part of the requirements for a module on desert geomorphology. The results were amazing: "The quality of assessments I get improves every year, as students put more and more effort into it. I am getting submissions that are astoundingly professional". And of course the output for the student goes way beyond the (very good!) marks for the specific module. 'After you have left University, how often do you write an essay? Critical thinking and writing skills are important, but the ability to use video and to think about presentation skills in a wider context is something that is transferable across all sorts of avenues and employment sectors'. The students enjoyed the experience so much that Michèle reports it is often the thing they recall once they



Still from a Geography student video

graduate: 'I find that even when they get into their third year, they come back to me and say 'Can I have a copy of my video, 'cos I want to show it to my mates'. They are so proud of it! When they graduate it is one of the things they remember doing from the entire course. It is different. If I could think of new and other ways to engage with that kind of creativity and enthusiasm, it would be great!'

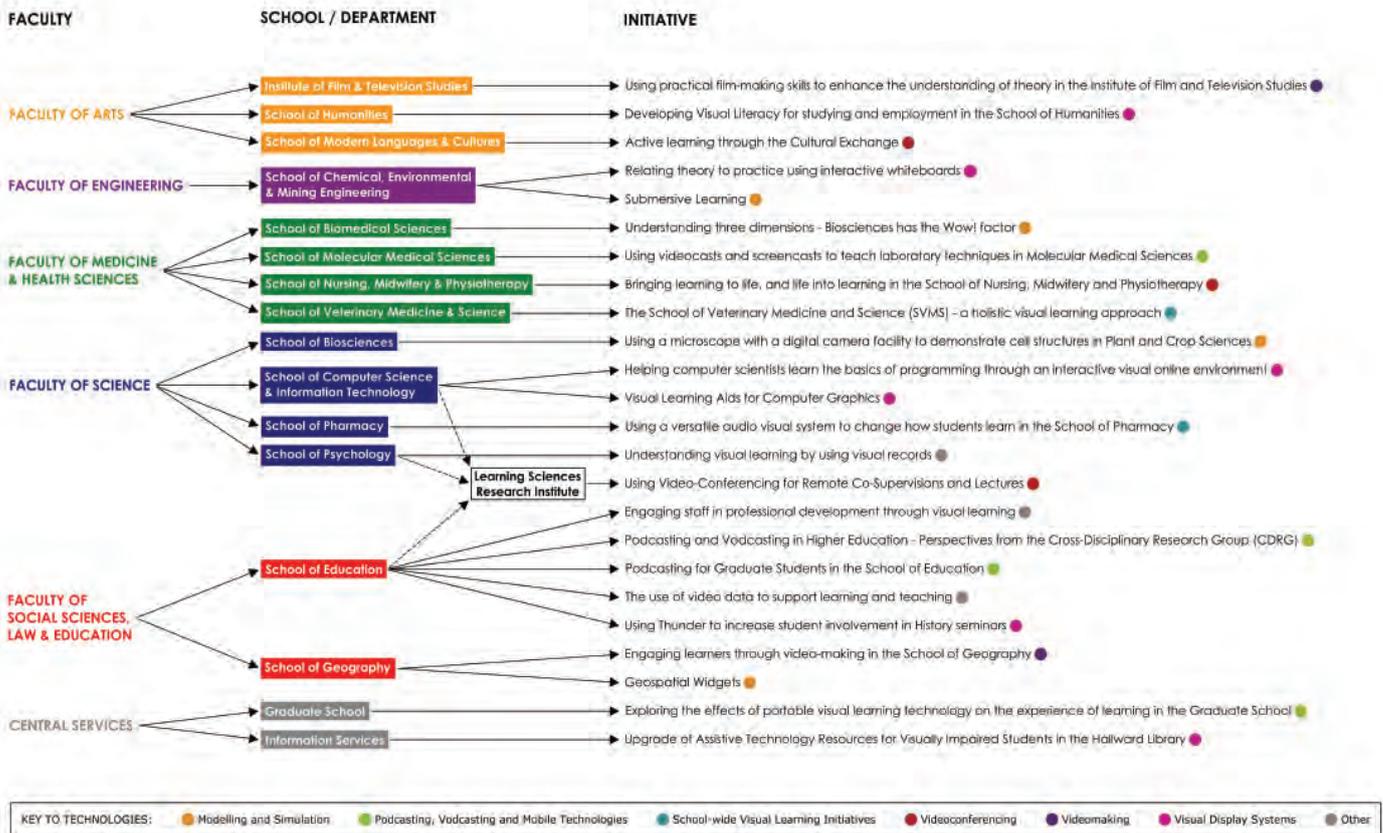
School of Pharmacy – investment attracting further investment

The School of Pharmacy worked intensively with the VLL to effect School-wide changes to how teaching was delivered, using a range of visual technologies. Seminar rooms were fitted with interactive whiteboards, and labs with visualisers and plasma screens. Learning and teaching outcomes were many and varied: using the visualisers and plasma screens allows students to remain at their tables during front-of-class demonstrations, avoiding crowding round the front and only getting a partial view of the work begin carried out; the interactive whiteboards

provide a rich method for recording group discussion that can be referred to beyond the end of the session; teachers are able to undertake more demonstrations than before and are able to stop the class at will and demonstrate any concept with which the students were struggling. Dr Matt Boyd reports that the positive impact of the VLL investment "has been instrumental in triggering an extended programme of investment in teaching technology within the School".

The Visual Learning Lab Manager Marian Anderton has been with the CETL since it began. What does she think about the outcomes described above, and the other work described in the Showcase? "The work described in the Showcase of Innovation in Visual Learning shows the extensive range of innovations that are taking place across the University, with staff finding creative solutions to challenges in their teaching. These ideas are readily transferable across Schools. They make the teaching sessions visually dynamic and enhance the learning outcomes of students".

Map 1: VLL Initiatives by Faculty



Map 2: VLL Initiatives by Technology



The future – what happens now?

It is gratifying to see how the work of the Visual Learning Lab is starting to be a catalyst for further investment from other sources, and for fundamental changes to teaching and learning delivery. It is also rewarding to know that from the initial investment, and the relationships between Departments and personnel that it encouraged, larger scale researcher partnerships have developed: Professor Roger Murphy and Dr Ruolan Wang from the Visual Learning Lab are collaborating with colleagues in the University's School of Veterinary Medicine and Sciences and the Royal Veterinary College, London on research into clinical practice in work-place settings, for example. The VLL team expect that the investments made over the past five years will continue to bear fruit for future generations of students and staff at the University. The VLL team are also involved in a range of international research collaborations, which they expect to extend well beyond the ending of this current HEFCE funding in July 2010.

For more information

If you would like a hard copy of the report, email the VLL Manager Marian Anderton on Marian.Anderton@nottingham.ac.uk. Alternatively, you can browse or download a copy from www.nottingham.ac.uk/visuallearninglab/casestudies/report.pdf

