

# Blending ancient and modern



Ashridge's newly restored Monks Barn provides a potent example of blended learning at work. Andrew Ettinger reports on how Ashridge has innovated without losing its heritage.

Andrew Ettinger joined Ashridge in 1985 and is director of learning resources. He is responsible for Ashridge's unique multi-media Learning Resource Centre and all of Ashridge's learning offerings. He also organises and lectures on courses for professional bodies in the UK and abroad and is an external lecturer at several universities. He has completed consultancy projects in India, Poland, Zimbabwe and the UK.

Email: [andrew.ettinger@ashridge.org.uk](mailto:andrew.ettinger@ashridge.org.uk)

Imagine a group of 15th century monks using quill pens and parchment to make bibles, then return to the 21st century to see a group of executives surfing the web in an internet café. Different eras, different technologies; same location – Ashridge's newly restored Monks Barn.

Monks Barn was originally built around 1480 and has been meticulously restored, including some of the original oak beams. The result is a stunning oak, glass and polished concrete building which now houses an internet café (serving the best coffee to be had at Ashridge), a new bookshop, meeting rooms on the mezzanine floor, a networked PC area and a state-of-the-art venue. The venue includes an array of innovative high-tech products available for all to experiment with and learn from.

Several organisations have offered products to display. Virtual reality machines, DVD learning products, cordless and futuristic workstations, satellite multilingual offerings and real-time financial dealing workstations are among those being evaluated. We are always interested in other new developments that capture the imagination.

A new research centre – the Centre for Leadership will also be housed in Monks Barn. This will build on our considerable expertise in the field and international contacts in the area and will disseminate knowledge and information via the

web. It will be headed by Gene Horan, who until recently was programme director for Ashridge's popular Leadership Programme – the Ashridge Leadership Process.

## **Virtual Learning Resource Centre**

Monks Barn is connected to the world class Learning Resource Centre (LRC) with a splendid new reception area connecting them.

The top floor is the home of the Virtual Learning Resource Centre (VLRC) and the graphics teams. The VLRC gives just-in-time access via the web to a range of learning materials including over 50 full text learning guides covering a multitude of different business and management skills and competences. There are also regular book summaries, industry trends, reviews of training materials, software guides, research summaries, live links to websites, databases and journal articles.

The VLRC is used by open and tailored clients as an integral part of their programmes but can also add value to in-house programmes by forming part of an organisation's e-learning offerings. Over 80 organisations subscribe including Lloyds TSB, The British Council, Volvo and Xerox Europe. It was originally developed in 1999 and is largely business and customer driven. The fact that Ashridge's programmes were

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becoming more modular, qualification numbers were growing and clients becoming increasingly international, all necessitated virtual access. It fitted in with our strategy, namely to become more international, to integrate educational technology and to create and exploit our intellectual capital.

It was also around this time that we started planning Monks Barn to bring the old and the new together. At that time we were perhaps not so aware that the VLRC would give us a competitive edge and generate growing revenue. One could say that VLRC subscriptions have paid for the restoration of Monks Barn in which the VLRC is created.

### What have we learnt

We first began producing e-learning content in 1994 and have some experience of the medium now. This understanding has inevitably come through pain and failure at times and similar experiences will inevitably occur with blended learning.

The development of the VLRC or *Ashridge @ a click*, as it is often referred to, has taught us many things about how e-learning can be integrated into organisations' training and development initiatives. We offer free trials to interested parties but just putting content on

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an intranet does not necessarily lead to usage. There needs to be a reason to participate – often a questionnaire that can only be answered by going online helps. We have yet to meet the organisation with a ubiquitous intranet, so we have adopted a policy of giving flexibility in delivery channels for one price. This also answers the question of where the learning takes place. It can be via an intranet at work, on the internet at home or in a learning centre such as the LRC/Monks Barn.

“The result is a stunning oak, glass and polished concrete building which now houses an internet café.”

In our experience one of the major reasons why e-learning is not taken up is because of poor internal marketing. In order to help this process we have created a whole range of aids to marketing, including jointly branded posters, post-its, mouse mats, user guides and brochures. The VLRC and graphics teams in Monks Barn produce these. We also attend road shows, training launches and training team meetings. Currently we are undertaking a European research project on e-learning, focusing on examples of best practice, organisations where the take-up has been slow and ones where no e-learning has taken place. We will disseminate our findings in due course and involve as many of our customers as we can.

By far the most important factor in usage of e-learning is how much it is linked to other training initiatives. These could be appraisals, performance reviews, personal development plans

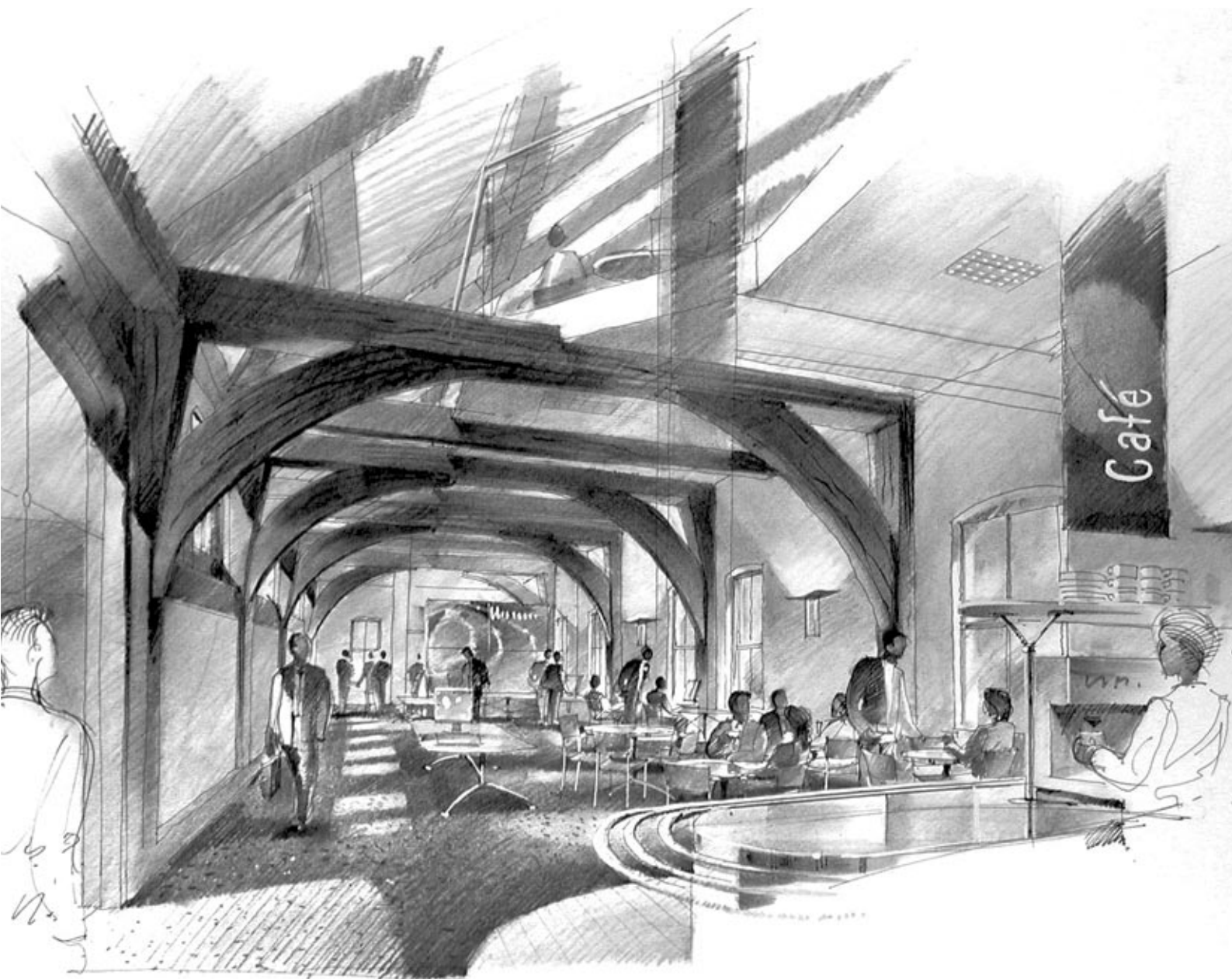
or a link to competency frameworks. Several customers have asked us to link our learning guides to their competency models. There is a self-assessed competency framework with 25 generic competences that links to relevant learning guides on the VLRC.

An extremely frustrating thing for executives is to be recommended learning materials but not have immediate access to them. This is especially true if learning at home, in the office or in a hotel. To alleviate this we are trying to make the VLRC a one-stop shop, giving live links to recommended websites, links to full-text journal articles and links to e-books in PDF format. We hope to do the same with streamed video in the near future; this is currently being tested in Monks Barn.

One reason several e-learning suppliers have not succeeded is that their products are exactly the same for everyone. There is no individually tailored element. We have overcome this by a series of self-assessed questionnaires that link learning needs to relevant content. As well as finding the best content, they also give users feedback based on their answers. On programmes this would support individual one-to-one coaching.

Information overload is a major problem, especially when using the internet. In order to avoid this scenario we have created a useful website section that recommends one to three websites for a whole range of business and management topics, industries, countries and reference material. These have a review and live link. There is also a section aimed at the human resource and training and development communities which gives advice on the best learning materials such as videos, books and multimedia products.

The whole emphasis of the VLRC is that it is practical and designed to save managers time. The learning guides even say “If you only have one hour, we recommend...” Another time saver is a series of book reviews



that are quite in depth and often cut out the need to read the book. All this is put together in a 15th century barn. Just as monks used to be leading edge due to their superior education, so Monks Barn is now used for leading edge technology-based learning.

access to content through the VLRC, online diagnostics and “e-sharing” facilities (a tailored web application), which provide document stores and asynchronous bulletin board discussion. Many organisations with corporate universities are incorporating material from Ashridge’s VLRC into their own blended learning programmes.

### Blended learning

Some of our programmes, especially tailored ones, use a combination of classroom teaching, syndicate work, diagnostics, one-to-one coaching, feedback and e-learning. The e-learning includes

### Tailored programmes

Recently we have delivered one or two programmes for clients where e-learning has been the central means of establishing the programme content. Pre-reading and interactive

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The face-to-face element was then used to pick up on pre-work from the e-learning, give feedback and discuss more complex issues.

Another recent theme for tailored clients has been to use the e-sharing application to facilitate virtual team activities and collaboration where documents are shared and work posted up for client sponsors to access.

In order to deliver blended learning successfully, cross-functional teams need to come together.

Several tutors have commented that a more blended approach has given programme participants flexibility in terms of the amount of time allocated to exercises and preparation depending on their interest and requirements. It also frees up classroom time for more facilitative or one-to-one activities.

Ashridge runs a consortium MBA for four German companies, Lufthansa, Robert Bosch, Merck and Deutsche Bank. From next year they will have two one-week modules that will be delivered virtually to Germany and will include the VLRC, e-sharing, live discussion forums, live access to tutors, online PowerPoint presentations and other learning materials. Monks Barn will become a learning portal for the participants, perhaps the oldest learning portal in the world.

## Open programmes

On the open course side we run a senior executive *Strategy and Leadership* programme –

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described in more detail overleaf – four times a year. This programme was recently redesigned to make it slightly shorter, more modular and give it a more blended approach. It now incorporates pre-course preparation work using web-based interactive learning objects. A typical learning object comprises 20 minutes of learning with up to six interactive exercises and illustrative multimedia examples. Participants are provided with a strategic tool-kit made up of eight learning objects, one for each strategic tool.

This is the self-paced element and ensures that all participants have the same understanding of the basic tools before the classroom sessions begin. Articles, PowerPoint presentations and handouts are available via e-sharing. In between modules, course members can also share contact details including pictures and biographical details as well as participate in discussion on topical issues.

## The challenges

### Culture and mindset

The biggest challenge in making all of this reality has been to change the existing mindset of Ashridge. Traditionally classroom teaching, syndicate work and one-to-one coaching have been the norm for Ashridge programmes, even though Ashridge has always been very innovative in its approach to learning. Several clients are now challenging this, especially on the tailored or customised side, requesting e-learning modules as part of the programme. Blended learning challenges traditional pricing models and reward structures.

Internal marketing and raising awareness of the benefits has helped shift the culture as has increasing client demand. We have successfully adopted an incremental, almost

drip-feed approach. More recognition is now being given for contributing content and supporting course members in online discussions. There have also been several development workshops around e-learning, including the skills needed to successfully implement blended learning.

#### Team working

In order to deliver blended learning successfully, cross-functional teams need to come together. These teams need to include tutors, instructional designers, IT infrastructure specialists, web/graphic designers, content managers and administrative support staff. This has been challenging for existing organisational structures.

To encourage teamworking, job roles are flexible. Innovation is actively encouraged, and regular cross-disciplinary/functional team meetings and events are held. We have also appointed an e-learning consultant, to assist with instructional design and to help coordinate the development of new blended learning initiatives across functions.

#### Engaging and supporting the learners

A further challenge relates to getting the learners on board and supporting them. This is especially true for the online discussion forums. Also, as Ashridge tends to work with senior and middle managers, IT literacy can be a barrier. In order for the e-learning element to be successful there has to be a close link between what is happening online and how it relates to the classroom sessions. The culture of the organisation has a great impact on the ease with which this is adopted.

Enormous energy has been put into helping customers market e-learning. This includes client visits and workshops, co-branding

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of brochures, mouse mats, post-its and posters. On the design front we have endeavoured to create seamless web-based learning environments that are intuitive to the learner. We also provide online and telephone support.

Linked to the cultural issues, we are constantly reminding faculty that they need to actively work at supporting learners and finding creative ways of blending the technology with the classroom. Success stories are shared.

Monks Barn is a success story. Being a charitable trust, Ashridge has a firm commitment to nurturing its heritage, and Monks Barn is an outstanding example of this. From being a seat of learning for monks in the 15th century, Monks Barn is now a portal for e-learning and a showcase for innovative learning and knowledge management. It makes a firm statement about Ashridge moving forward and involving our customers in a lifelong learning partnership. █