

# Alder Grange School Eclipse Case Study

## The Guinea-Pig's Tale

So the 'phone rang and a voice said, "How would you like to be a guinea pig?" I was vaguely alarmed by the suggestion – a consequence of having had a grandfather with a particularly warped sense of humour. As a child, he had alarmed me with dire warnings concerning the consequences of handling my guinea pigs incorrectly – 'Their eyes drop out if you pick them up by their tails!' – and for weeks afterwards I'd had nightmares about going to their cages and treading on fallen eyeballs. Luckily, all that I was being offered was the chance to trial Micro Librarian Systems' new 'Identikit' system.

I'd already had my old SIMS library module converted to MLS's Eclipse system, and I'd been very impressed with it: previously I'd used a scanner to 'read' barcodes in books to speed up issues and returns, but Eclipse extended bar-coding to library users, too. Every pupil was given a PIN in barcode form so, instead of manually searching for a surname, the librarian scanned the pupil's barcode and the appropriate account was immediately shown on screen. The result was that the borrowing process was massively

speeded up. However, it quickly became apparent that the whole process could be slowed down by the one variable outside the librarian's control: did the pupil have his user barcode with him when he wanted to loan a book? Furthermore, could you be sure that the barcode he offered really belonged to him?

Finding a pupil manually on a computer database is possible, but a nuisance when the library is busy. Much more frustrating and time-consuming, however, is trying to track down an overdue book issued to a pupil who has used someone else's barcode. Usually this has happened when a pupil wanted to borrow a book without going through the hassle of explaining why he wasn't carrying his barcode. Or sometimes because he had reached the borrowing limit on his own card. But whatever the reason, the end result was the same: valuable librarian time wasted on unnecessary searches. Initially MLS's offer seemed too good to be true: put simply, they claimed Identikit would do away with all library cards and borrower barcodes; pupils would simply need to touch a pad and the library computer would instantly 'recognise' them and record any loans in their accounts.

“Since no ‘fingerprints’, as such, are stored, there are no Data Protection implications and the system has attracted National Grid for Learning interest.”

It sounded so futuristic that I anticipated getting Identikit up and running would be a long, complicated affair: I couldn't have been more wrong. Installing the software took less than five minutes, while the touch-pad – a surprisingly compact unit - simply plugged into the computer's USB port. Each borrower initially had to touch the pad four times with the same finger so Identikit could 'memorise' details of the skin patterns (it did this mathematically, storing a series of numbers relating to the finger 'pattern' as part of each person's PIN). As this was a world first, the headteacher decided to send a letter to all parents to explain exactly how the touchpad worked and to invite them to visit the library if they had any concerns about Identikit's use. In the event, no-one voiced any objections – we have only ever received very positive comments and feedback.



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Since each of your fingers and thumbs has a different 'pattern', we decided it would prevent any confusion if everyone were asked to use the same finger – (we chose the right index finger). By getting pupils into the library in teaching groups, lined up with index fingers ready (surprising how many don't know which that is!), we processed 610 pupils onto the system in a day. It was very quick once we'd got into the routine.

Considering it was Identikit's first 'real' use, we experienced very few teething problems. Occasionally it 'found' the wrong person's account – but this was usually obvious: we don't have many Year 11 boys named Wendy! Sometimes Identikit had difficulty recognising pupils if they had particularly small fingers. But as each problem became apparent, MLS upgraded and modified Identikit to improve its performance: for example, touching the first letter of the borrower's surname on the keyboard meant Identikit started searching for borrower details beginning with that letter. Identikit was also modified so it 'remembered' frequent library users and stored their details at the top of the list – to facilitate speedy location. The result was that Identikit now finds the correct account within 1 to 2 seconds of the pad being touched. In my school it has run trouble-free for nearly a year and has been virtually 100% accurate.

Though Eclipse will operate in a Client/Server environment, we have decided to install the library software locally on the library computer, which will act as a mini-server for the SearchStar (OPAC) software, to enable students to search the

catalogue. The advantage from the library's point of view is that the library computer will continue to operate at full efficiency even if the school network is being heavily used (e.g. lunchtimes, internet access, etc.) Running the OPAC software peer-to-peer presents no problems; the only disadvantage of this arrangement is that back-ups need to be carried out by the librarian. However, the installation of an internal Zip disc means that a back-up of all library files is completed in seconds (and, for peace of mind, even creating a second back-up copy to take off site is no inconvenience – after all, how many librarians do you know who would want to re-catalogue their 10,000 plus books, even if Eclipse's 'Magicat' database does take much of the chore out of entering books onto the system.)

Identikit also contains software enabling you to add a USB cam to your library system and thus attach photos to borrowers' record cards. USB web cams are widely available and, once installed, Eclipse finds the drivers and the cam window becomes active when the Identikit screen is launched. It is then simply a button-click to 'capture' and store a still photo at the same time that you record the finger pattern. The benefit to the librarian in a large school, of course, is that tracking down a pupil is even easier if you know who you're looking for! And for those schools where security is a problem, the advantage of USB hardware is that the camera and touchpad can be easily unplugged for storage in a locked cupboard if necessary.

Identikit has required very little in the way of maintenance – an occasional wipe over the touch pad is all I've needed to do since it was first installed. The use of the touchpad has been so successful that I'll be surprised if other applications don't quickly follow – like replacing the way registers are taken, or for gaining access to buildings or offices, etc. But from my point of view, the best news of all is that library borrowings have show a marked increase following the installation of 'Identikit'. It's partly because of the novelty value of the touchpad, of course, but mainly, I suspect, because now no-one has to remember to carry a library card or barcode. Identikit has literally put books at the tips of our pupils' fingers!

So - does this make me the first guinea pig to have a happy tale?

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