Southend Adult Community College: Independent learning through Moodle

Summary

The introduction of Moodle at Southend Adult Community College (Southend ACC) has given students access to course materials, induction materials and course resources. As students on Language courses are studying the course on a part-time basis they can view these documents while on the train going to work at weekends and on holiday. This encourages the development of independent learning skills and reinforces learning before the class. Tutors report more focused learners who are confident in using online resources. The tutors no longer have to carry course portfolios, thus saving time and printing costs. The tutors have improved their ILT skills and confidence through using Moodle and through developing online course materials.

Screenshot of the French Intermediate Moodle course
About Southend Adult Community College

Located across three centres, Southend Adult Community College (Southend ACC) has 265 Staff, 74 Volunteers, 8,349 Enrolments, and 4,675 Individual Learners.

The College has a wide offer of leisure learning, vocational and careers courses, foundation learning for 16-19 year olds, as well as apprenticeships and traineeships.

The challenge

Southend ACC’s old VLE had become redundant and there was no support for tutors. The tutors had no access to interactive whiteboards, and could not view documents from the internet, so had to use flipcharts. The printed hand-outs were not of a high standard and if learners could not attend lessons they usually did not receive any notes.

The Languages Curriculum Manager, Najat Raghib-Campbell felt that if the resources were online the tutors would not have to hold paper versions of all the course documents.

Previously, if a tutor was absent then the covering tutor was not always able to gain access to the course documents. There were no opportunities to develop independent learning and at the same time improve learners’ skills in using technology. A lot of learners on these courses take holidays during the course and they wanted to be able to continue their learning while on vacation.

Several years ago, the College developed a VLE with an external company. However the design and structure of the VLE was not suitable for course development, being more suitable as a College intranet. It required a great deal of technical expertise and knowledge to create a course. The tutors found it very difficult to understand and it was not easy to use. As the tutors lost confidence in the VLE they did not want to promote it to their students.

“Our plan was to find a VLE that was easy to use, so that tutors would be inspired to create resources and learners would have access to resources 24/7 and could study independently.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

The activity

In 2011, Southend ACC invited a consultant to review their existing VLE, preparing a report on the pros and cons of moving to an open source solution such as Moodle.

Lorraine realised that the Moodle had to be cost effective, as Southend ACC had limited funding for the project. They soon realized that they could train their own staff
on how to use technology, rather than buying in services, as had been the case with the previous VLE.

“We looked at different options for hosting, developing and technical support/training. We found Moodle much easier to use, it had a better interface and very good reviews from other colleges. We were advised to get Moodle hosted and technically supported by an external company for the first year.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

Lorraine and e-Learning Coordinator, Lana Clarke, drew up a strategy to roll out the VLE to tutors who had been E-guides in the past. As confidence grew they then decided to introduce Moodle to different curriculum areas.

Coming from an ICT background, and not being familiar with Moodle, Lorraine and Lana had to do lots of research, read lots of books and learn as they were going along.

“We reviewed different VLEs and read reports on how different colleges were using their VLE. We then sought advice from our RSC about approaching different colleges to get hands on experience of the VLE.” Lorraine Baldry and Lana Clarke

Lorraine and her colleagues first introduced Moodle in 2012, and decided to adopt Moodle 2.0. They decided that Moodle would be externally hosted, as they did not have the technical expertise, within the College, to support Moodle.

“We booked some training from our hosting company and from the consultant, Terry Loane. Terry was excellent with lots of ideas for course design, and VLE Middleware delivered administrative training for us.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

The training took place with several staff who were going to be the champions for Moodle, as they had good ICT skills and experience. The timescale was to release Moodle in September 2012, so Southend ACC undertook a great deal of training throughout the summer.

They soon rolled out Moodle to Science, Maths and Psychology, followed by Web Page Design, and then introduced the course to the Languages in Curriculum in September 2013.

“As a lot of tutors go away in August and the courses don’t start until October, we only had a window of September to get the tutors in, trained, practising and ready. We then had to upload all 45 of the courses in late September/early October ready for the start of the courses. It was very challenging but not impossible.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

“We had been visiting classes to assist students on logging on but found this very time consuming and not sustainable. When we rolled Moodle out to Language students, a supporting email was sent to them all with a PDF document showing how to log on. We were also on hand to assist the more nervous learners who had not used the internet before.” Lorraine Baldry and Lana Clarke
Lorraine and her colleagues faced a few small obstacles and challenges during the project, but were able to conquer them along the way.

“I went to one class and the students had brought their iPads in, and we immediately thought, oh we haven’t thought about mobile. The learners were another step ahead of us, so we realized we had to check that our Moodle was compatible with mobile devices, very quickly.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

The outcomes

• The use of Moodle has grown and it is now used extensively across the language courses.

• At the start of the project the tutors were not confident about their ILT skills, but with support in the sessions, their confidence grew and they became more enthusiastic as time passed.
Learners are now more independent in their learning and Moodle has reports of high usage, during the evening and at weekends.

The students have benefited:

- As they’ve improved their IT skills.
- They are becoming independent learners.
- They are learning at their own pace.

"As a result of using Moodle, the tutors have acquired new skills, and are now much more ready to embrace technology. I observed one classroom which revolved around the interactive whiteboard and bringing lots of resources in from Moodle. That tutor would’ve never have done this a year before the project.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

Moodle has also introduced a flipped classroom approach to learning as students now arrive in class having accessed the resources beforehand on Moodle.

“As a result of Moodle, learners have said that they are now more ready for lessons and are moving at a better pace through the course. It also helps those people at different levels, and helps those who are perhaps not as good as others as they can practise more at home.” Julie Farrell, French Tutor.
“We found that with students who previously wouldn’t have been able to enrol on the French or Spanish courses because it was 4 weeks in, were put onto Moodle, and could catch up at home and still do the course. That was a quite unexpected outcome of introducing Moodle.” Lana Clarke, e-Learning Co-ordinator

The impact

“Although it might not be directly because of Moodle, observations for tutors in Foreign Languages courses are more outstanding than in other areas of the college.

“We’ve had the highest satisfaction rates for very satisfied and satisfied learners, with retention improving since the introduction of Moodle from 92% to 95% this year.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

The introduction of Moodle has also had a substantial impact on functional skills ICT Level 1 and 2.

The learners are introduced to their course on induction, and through initial assessment, Moodle has helped learners to focus on their personalised IT gaps, thus allowing them to access the topics needed to enable them to improve.
Languages tutors have saved considerable amounts of time printing off course paperwork, and having all resources on Moodle has made the planning of lessons much easier.

“The Foreign Languages Curriculum Manager Najat Raghib-Campbell has been able to review all tutors’ resources at any time online and does not have to arrange a meeting with them to bring in course folders to college to be reviewed.” Lorraine Baldry, Learning Improvement Manager

When learners have booked holidays in term time they have even been keeping up with their Foreign Languages courses using their mobile devices in places as far and wide as Australia.

**The lessons learned**

Lorraine and Lana have learnt a variety of lessons and have a number of hints and tips for other providers.

- Technical support from the outset is really crucial and if you can use your in-house technical back-up it will save a lot of time and prevent major headaches.

- Don’t assume tutors or learners have high ILT skill levels.

- On the other hand, don’t underestimate the usage of tablets and iPads for the more mature learner and utilise their knowledge and enthusiasm to support their peers.

- If you are taking the lead on the project, risk assess the impact the project is going to have on the other aspects of your job. It will take longer than you think to set up but it is a learning curve and you do learn unexpected skills along the way.

Lorraine and Lana would advise providers to:

- Be brave and embrace new technology, network with other organisations and the RSC. There will be a college that has been in your position before and they may help you, if you ask nicely.

- Use coaching strategies to support your tutors and you will get them on-board. Cultivate a team spirit amongst the tutors delivering the project; they will then support their peers.

- Demonstrate Moodle to the learners, it will take a lot of time to visit all the classes but it will pay dividends over time.
In the future Southend ACC have a number of plans to improve and enhance their use of ILT. They hope to:

- Roll out Moodle to other areas of the curriculum.
- Automate the enrolment process with their MIS system.
- Develop courses using Xerte and Captivate.
- Launch a try before you buy service for Moodle, so potential students can sample the languages resources to see if they would like to enrol in the future.

Useful links

Southend Adult Community College website

Languages class feedback on Moodle video

Class feedback on Moodle video

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