South Worcestershire College: E-learning review contributes towards Ofsted ‘Good’

Summary

Following a disappointing Ofsted inspection in 2012, one of the actions taken by staff at South Worcestershire College was inviting its local Jisc Regional Support Centre (RSC) to carry out an impartial e-learning review. Taking their advice and suggestions on board, the college formulated a package of improvements which has led to more consistency in the use of ILT across the college. Ofsted praised the college for this during a subsequent inspection visit which resulted in a much improved, overall ‘Good’ grade.

About South Worcestershire College

South Worcestershire College is a small general further education college with two main campuses in Evesham and Malvern.

The challenge

In October 2012, South Worcestershire College received a disappointing Ofsted report resulting in a grade 4. This was due to a number of factors, including a lack of consistency in the use of Information and Learning Technology (ILT). Some teachers were using it but they were in the minority.
Maria Arkell, Vice Principal says, “When I took over responsibility for teaching and learning, there was no clear strategy in place for the staff to buy into. I wanted to drive e-learning forward but felt that I didn’t have the knowledge and understanding to do so.”

“We needed something that would help us to benchmark our position at that time and show the whole picture of ILT across the college.”

The activity

Maria and Lorraine Pearson, the college’s Quality Officer, contacted the Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands to request an e-learning review. This is an independent evaluation of a learning provider’s current e-learning position that outlines strengths and areas for improvement. Acting as a critical friend, a small team of the RSC’s e-learning advisers visited the college and reviewed e-learning practice across key functions, including: teaching and learning, learning resources/spaces, e-learning leadership and management and IT infrastructure.

Maria says, “The e-learning review involved meetings with both staff and students and the whole process was very open. We wanted people to ask questions and dig as it was important for us to get an honest picture – the staff were perhaps more open with the RSC than they would have been with me, which gave us the starting point that we needed.”

Following the review, the college received a written report and action plan with recommendations for moving forward. Among the recommendations made in the report, the RSC suggested:

- Developing a clear e-learning strategy
- Defining how the college’s performance/Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) committee will steer e-learning development
- Holding short e-learning skill development sessions
- Committing to the college’s principle of ‘making maximum use of Moodle’ and encourage more widespread and consistent use of the VLE

The outcomes

After the visit from the RSC in February 2013, the college implemented the following changes:

- Started work on a new e-learning strategy
- Appointed a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Co-ordinator/champion to work with Lorraine and supported by the college’s web developer. This group took ownership of the VLE
- Gave the TEL committee (which comprises TEL champion, staff from across the College, the Quality Officer, the IT Manager, the Web Developer, a Teaching and Learning Coach and the Vice Principal Learning and Performance) more ownership of e-learning – the committee came up with a new structure for the VLE
• Moved from Moodle 1.9 to version 2.4 and overhauled the VLE

Following a visit to Solihull College (for advice on re-developing and getting staff on board with Moodle) and talks with the TEL committee, Lorraine’s team re-structured the VLE. They subsequently trained members of the TEL committee prior to a staff development day which took place in July, in readiness for having Moodle up and running for the start of the new academic year.

Maria says, “We wanted more consistency in the use of TEL and specifically Moodle, as we wanted it to be a platform for other technologies to feed into. The drag and drop functionality of Moodle 2.4 makes it easier for staff to use and so they bought into it. I think it also made a difference having the TEL committee so closely involved with the VLE overhaul as it was driven from the bottom up rather than the top down.”

During the staff development day, staff were shown Moodle and the new star rating system which was shared by Solihull College who allowed the college to tweak it to their needs. Staff were given time during the day with the TEL reps to work on their Moodle courses and build up their content.

Maria adds, “In the past, staff expressed concerns at not having enough time to get to grips with technology. In addition to the staff development day, we allocated further time to allow the staff chance to learn how to use Moodle and apply it pedagogically.”

The impact

When Ofsted visited the college in November 2013, they praised, among other things, the more consistent and improved use of technology:

“Teachers are now more skilful and imaginative in their use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support learning.”

“Effective staff development has helped teachers to improve their approach to using computers to help students to learn.”

Subsequently, Ofsted awarded the college a grade 2.

Maria says, “To get a grade 2 was fantastic! Although the college had made a number of changes that contributed towards the improved grade, TEL was an important part of it. We refer to it as TEL (Technology to Enhance Learning) as it’s a whole package around supporting improvement and includes the TEL champions, the committee and focus groups. We look at how TEL is being used, the learners’ experience and provide extra support if needed.”

Now, all new members of staff have Moodle training as part of their induction with the TEL co-ordinator. The Moodle star rating system is also in full effect.

She adds, “The whole college ethos has changed. Staff are now more accountable and understand what success is and what Ofsted are looking for.”
Maria summarises, “The impartiality of the e-learning review made a huge difference. It helped me to present a case for much needed resources to the Executive. Without it, it would have been extremely difficult to move forward and implement the changes with TEL that we needed to.”

The lessons learned

Maria has the following advice for learning providers who may have received a disappointing Ofsted inspection report:

- “Ask your local Jisc Regional Support Centre for an e-learning review. It was invaluable for helping us to drive TEL forward.”
- “Give staff clear messages so that they know what is expected of them.”
- “Staff appreciate being listened to so give them a platform – we found our staff bought into TEL as they were able to contribute their ideas through focus groups and the TEL committee.”
- “Ensure that a member of staff or a small group have ownership of the VLE”
- Visit other learning providers to see examples of good practice and get ideas on how to move forward.”

Useful links

South Worcestershire College

South Worcestershire College inspection reports

Links to related case studies

Burton and South Derbyshire College: Independent ILT review drives learning forward

Liverpool Community College: The benefits of a college wide review focusing on ILT and e-learning

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