Barnsley College: A whole college approach to interaction within the classroom

Summary

At Barnsley College, the Learning Technologies Unit (LTU) carried out research indicating a need to increase staff confidence in using technologies, increase availability of resources and improve interaction between staff and students. A pilot scheme using an interactive wireless tablet focussed on providing staff with a tool that enables them to provide a more engaging learning experience. Senior management supported the pilot, enabling a full roll out of interactive slates to all staff. The resulting whole college approach has shown a significant impact on staff and student experience.

About Barnsley College

Barnsley College is the main provider of post-16 education in the local area. It provides programmes in 15 subject areas across six separate sites, including a working farm. The College enrolls over 3,400 full-time and just fewer than 4,000 part-time learners. Approximately 90% of full-time and 10% of part-time learners are aged 16–18.

The challenge

Having only been in existence for two years, the LTU team identified, through observation and informal research, the following key areas that needed to be developed:

- Staff confidence in technology
- Staff use of technology, especially to increase interaction between staff and students
- Availability of tools to support teaching and engage students

Lack of technology in the classroom was a perceived barrier with only 20% of rooms containing one of a range of different types of interactive whiteboard
with different learning requirements and software versions; some of these were reaching the end of the life expectancy too. Therefore a sustainable solution was required.

**The activity**

Being relatively recently formed, the LTU team decided the first task was to research the use of information technology and associated confidence levels to identify development options. A key area investigated was the interaction between staff and students within the classroom and technologies that would best support teaching and learning. Staff needed to be provided with tools that would enable them to engage students with learning content.

Following the LTU research into the best interaction tools available on the market the department purchased a Promethean ActivSlate to use and evaluate. This is a wireless tablet that can control the interactive whiteboard from anywhere within the classroom. In June 2010, it was decided that they would run a pilot project of 20 slates to assess the use within all curriculum areas of the College, through Advanced practitioners. Staff using the slates were given training before using the slates and they subsequently gave feedback.

The overwhelming view from the two-month pilot was that the devices met all the objectives set in the original project brief. The Principal and Senior Management Team agreed to purchase all tutors a slate, in part due to the responsiveness of the software and resources suitable for further education freely available from the manufacturer. There was an understanding that to receive a slate staff must attend a training session. The training involved:

- Best practice on using the device
- Engaging the user
- Creating and demonstrating resources

Internal funds were made available to purchase an additional 260 slates.

This development was one of the actions within the College’s e-Strategy plan for 2010/11. All progress was reviewed at Senior Management level and
discussed at the LTU performance review during 2010/11, ensuring staff were aware of the developments and to voice any concerns.

The LTU department hold the remaining devices ready for centralised use and/or with new members of staff.

**The outcomes**

Due to the positive way the new technology was introduced and explained, about 250 staff chose to attend a session and now have their own slate to use.

By using the slates within the classroom, the teacher has the opportunity to engage students as active participants within the classroom by passing the control of the slate over to them; with full control of the board, the learner can annotate, move or sort information as required. It also frees the teacher to move around and use the slate to display information on the board as required. This enhances any activities within the classroom and engages both learner and teacher throughout their learning experience.

Robert Hutton, LTU Manager, said that they “didn't want ‘front of the class’ teaching, they wanted solutions that would bring the technology to the user” adding that he “believes that using slates breaks down barriers by engaging and including all students at all levels. It brings the interaction and [the] device to the student”.

Findings from participants in the pilot and early roll out reported the following benefits of using the slates, matching the initial project aims:

- Easy to use for the staff and student
- Engage students with learning
- Increases student and staff interaction
- Promotes and helps to provide outstanding teaching
- Shortens the time between content delivery and information acquisition checking
- Breaks down the barrier between teacher, student and the front of the class, resulting in a greater interaction and sharing of ideas

Slates are also proving to be value for money, with approximately 90% saved on each classroom installation; an interactive board costs approximately £1900 and each interactive slate costs £190, this development also standardises the use of classroom interaction technology within the college.

**The impact**

As per the Student Technology Survey, 70% of students indicated that they value, embrace and understand how technologies could have a positive impact to their learning. 72% of staff are responding to this, using the slates/interactive whiteboards.
Several teachers commented on the positive changes due to the introduction of the interactive slates in the evaluation questionnaire, their comments are below:

- “Bottom line I have stopped using PowerPoint slides and use the Slate with the ActivInspire electronic flipcharts instead. Enough said!!” (Engineering Teacher)
- “I have used it in a number of lessons to good effect; the students were engaged and comfortable to use the equipment.” (Land Based Industries Teacher)
- “Using it to set activities like quizzes, Q & As, calculations, show pictures, group/team works, etc. for the students. Together with the software, it will be a great boost to my lessons.” (Construction & Engineering Teacher)
- “I have more control wherever my position in the classroom. Also to get learners more engaged and let them have a go.” (Sport & Public Services Teacher)

The LTU team now has a streamlined foundation of training and support that is more manageable due to the strategic purchase and roll out of a single system / software, rather than lots of disjoined elements being used in different departments by different people. Also by providing the same technology through a whole college approach, there are less barriers and excuses for individuals to not use technology when it can enhance and support teaching and learning.

**The lessons learned**

An essential element of the project and ongoing developments within the college is that the Senior Management are aware of the importance of changes and are seen to fully support them. Where this occurs there is more chance of receiving the internal funding required and the inclusion of points in the College strategic plan, showing it is being led from the top. The use of interactive slates was one of the key drivers within the College e-Strategy plan for 2010/11 and progress has been reviewed at regular performance reviews by the Principal and the Senior Management Team and further discussed at department reviews during 2010/11, ensuring they were aware of the developments.

One aspect of the project that may have been different in an ideal scenario is the number of participants in each training session during the whole college roll out of the slates. Ideally, there would have been the space and time for fewer than 20 people per session.

Robert concluded by looking to the future stating “by using the interactive slates we now have the foundation for using other classroom technologies, which will further develop our outstanding Teaching and Learning strategy. We are currently running a project looking at the use of visualisers within the classroom, seeing how they can be used in conjunction with a slate to enhance learning by incorporating the visual and image capture aspects and
the ability to annotate and save using the slates. We will also begin exploring the potential of handheld voting tools and software – all within the Promethean range to maintain the streamlined approach to training and support this project has established”.

**Useful links**

- Barnsley College
- Promethean
- Promethean ActivSlate
- Promethean Planet

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