Shipley College: Google Apps et al, the new VLE?

Summary

Shipley College, collaborating with Joseph Priestley College, investigated using the expansive set of tools ‘Google Apps et al’, collectively, to provide an alternative Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in order to give the learner a sense of ownership and longevity to their lifelong learning. The results included large financial and ‘green’ savings, as well providing innovation in-line with students differing and changing learning culture.

About Shipley College

Shipley College is a small, friendly college in the heart of Saltaire in West Yorkshire with a great range of apprenticeships, full and part-time courses.

The challenge

The driver behind this project was the rising cost of systems used to support learning versus the use of ‘free’ online web 2.0 tools, specifically ‘apps’ or application software that helps users perform tasks online. The project involved a collaborative approach between Shipley College and Joseph Priestley College to provide evidence that these tools (based around, but not limited to, Google Apps) could be used as an alternative to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The activity

This was originally an LSIS Resource Utilisation Network project, run in partnership with Joseph Priestley College. The aim of the project was to investigate the use of web 2.0 tools (specifically Google Apps et al – including Xtranormal, Prezi, Wix, Twiddla and a range of Android apps) as a ‘free’ replacement to a VLE.
The first change, in September 2010, was the introduction of new email (Google) accounts for students. Around the same time six media and business tutors began using Google Sites with students rather than the existing college VLE (Fronter).

120 members of the college attended a staff development event in December 2010. Staff worked in department teams learning about and exploring the potential of Google Apps. In January 2011 the Leadership and Management team were brought fully on-board with training and their own accounts, giving a “head start to change”.

Staff email accounts were transferred from the existing system (Novell GroupWise) to G-Mail in May 2011. Tara Phelan, E-Learning Manager, said “Shipley College experienced a smooth migration because they included lots of preparation before and training after”. During the change, the number of apps formally supported at each stage was limited, to ensure development available was sustainable at the highest level and information overload was limited. Initially only “email” and ‘calendar’ functions were supported, especially as the existing VLE was still active, though staff with more skills could create their own Google Sites and use Google Documents.

Another cross college training event occurred in June 2011 and included student feedback from the Google Sites pilots as well as from staff with

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experience of using the different Apps. Tara explained; “It is important that staff development is highly personalised and not ‘one size fits all’ as Google is like an empty house, filling with different things, supporting tutors with the way they want to work.”

From knowledge gained during the first year of the project, Shipley College have chosen to create standard ‘tutor’ and ‘student’ accounts that limit what apps they can use. The student accounts have access to email, calendar, sites and docs and while they were the only ones originally active on the tutor accounts, they now have the option to use any available as they have all been ‘switched on’. To pull together systems, the address books for the staff and student email accounts were linked in September 2011, simplifying communication from the start of the new academic year.

The outcomes

One of the key outcomes identified by Tara Phelan is that Shipley College are now “leveraging business advantage out of the cloud potential”, adding that “Google Apps give tutors and students autonomy and control over their documents, turning teaching and learning on its head!”

Various process and procedure changes have resulted in improvements including:

- Revolutionised communication and real time (learner-learner, learner-tutor, tutor-tutor) collaboration, transforming the teaching and learning process.
- Using Google Apps online availability minimises the need for specific/proprietary/expensive software and enhances the distance learning agenda.
- Students create work and choose who to share it with (teachers, parents, prospective employer etc.), depending on different situations.
- Improved work efficiency by including some business systems e.g. email, document storage, intranets, printing quota authorization, collaboration on documents (reducing face-to-face meetings) and shared calendars in the changes.
- Business systems (emails/calendars) and Teaching and Learning (alerts and possibly timetables) integrated with personal, mobile devices.
- Links with other projects including MoLeNET; repurposing existing equipment (smartphones and ultra mobile pcs) and improving sustainability.

The impact

This project, and resulting change in working practices and systems used, has already shown the financial benefits both colleges involved will have. Shipley College will make short-term savings of £15,000 recurrent as well as a £28,000 one-off, which represents 6% of the combined IT & Repro revenue
budgets and 8% of the IT capital budget, and long-term savings of £26,000 pa (10% of revenue budgets) including non/deferred/reduced replacement of:

- CRM £3,000 (pa)
- VLE £10,000 licence (pa)
- SAN £6,000 (one-off moving data from network to the cloud)
- ESX server £12,000 (one-off)
- Email/collaboration, GroupWise licence and server £2,300 (pa) and £10,000 (one-off)

Joseph Priestley College will make short-term savings equivalent to 9% of the IT revenue budget, 4.7% of the IT revenue budget and 9% of the capital budget, specifically by not replacing the Microsoft Exchange Server, saving:

- Consultant time £3,788 (one off)
- Server £20,064 (one off)
- Technician £7,000 (ongoing)
- Reducing server space and backup required, £18,000 deferred 2yrs
- Removing Sharepoint developer cost £12,000 in-house (ongoing)

Further savings at Joseph Priestley College may result from the reduction in licensing costs.

Green savings have also been identified, for both organisations, including reduced:

- Hardware/servers required
- Reprographics services (also a financial saving of £11,000 (recurrent) 20% estimated in 2yrs time for Shipley College)
- Power consumptions (servers/printers, air conditioning)

Potential positive changes relating to staffing, through the need to maintain fewer systems, could result in technician support time being redistributed / transferred to other upcoming areas, including time to research and plan.

Also non financial benefits relate to:

- Opening other opportunities by purchasing / using third party apps through the Google Market Place, utilising single sign-on.
- Providing built-in innovation in-line with students differing and changing learning culture and the products they use, complimenting many students’ social use of technology.
The lessons learned

A key success criteria for this project was acknowledging that there was going to be a big cultural shift within the organisation. This was successfully managed through:

- **Buy-in by the Senior Management Team.**
- **Promotion of a whole organisational approach similar to the eCPD programme.**
- **Using a pick and mix approach by providing a set of tools to work with, not dictating how and when to use them.**
- **Encouraging staff to remain open-minded to new and evolving ways of learning.**
- **Involving students in activities such as creating sites for their group. Encouraging and promoting staff buy-in and autonomy; raising awareness of cost-cutting benefits to counteract resistance.**
- **Ensuring IT Staff are on board and able to support the changing staff skills set, while also transferring their skills from hardware to software (Google Apps).**
- **Auditing all systems to ascertain which could go to the cloud, gaining approval from IT and synchronising with any license notice periods.**

Due to the fact that this project involved two organisations of different sizes there is already evidence that it is a transferrable project and particularly
appropriate in the current economic and cultural climate. Tara Phelan put together the following quick lists to help other organisations facing a similar change:

**Top 9 things to do:**
1. Changing email to a ‘free’ service is the first quick win for organisations facing reductions in budget or funding.
2. Ensure that the management team are fully on board and know what support they need to provide before the switch over.
3. Project planning, target setting, action planning need to be linked to strategic objectives; constant review is essential.
4. Maintain regular, honest communication and training with staff to generate buy in. Using mentors and 'local experts' will help people find support quickly.
5. Concentrate on ensuring success though migration of existing emails, contacts and calendars with well resourced, staggered, staff development.
6. Install and use Google Chrome on all PCs to ensure there are fewer errors and/or malfunctions.
7. Ensure the Acceptable Use Policy is up to date to reflect the use of cloud computing within the education sector for staff and students.
8. Provide single sign on from the network to Google Apps.
9. Celebrate success and share good practice to raise aspirations and allow individuals to reflect on progress and consolidate any new skills.

**Top 8 things not to do:**
1. Raise expectations of Google Apps which could result in initial disappointment: Don't expect Google Apps to work like existing systems.
2. Impose a tight timescale that leaves no room for new initiatives and unexpected benefits.
3. Change too much at once to cause information overload.
4. Focus only on one system, as you will miss opportunities to integrate others.
5. Assume staff understand the Google Apps concept and how it will affect their daily work.
6. Avoid 'one size fits all' training and development.
7. Hamper creativity with bureaucracy so opportunities are missed.
8. Enable too many 'Google Apps' on switch over to cause information overload and confusion.

**Useful links**

- [Shipley College](#)
- [Google Apps](#)
- [Google Apps et al the new VLE video clip](#)

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