Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology: Increasing Staff Engagement with the VLE

Summary

Since Shrewsbury College switched to the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in 2006, ILT Co-ordinator Richard Booth and Learning Technologist Dave Shearan have actively encouraged engagement across the college through various initiatives. The most recent is ‘Moodle Maturity’ – a self-assessment process which encourages staff to consider their current position with Moodle, and how they could progress further.

About Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology

It is a general Further Education college based primarily at two main campuses. The college, which predominantly offers vocational courses, attracts students from the local town, North Shropshire and South Shropshire. It has a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in Construction.
The challenge

Following unsuccessful approaches to engage staff with the Virtual Campus VLE, Shrewsbury College trialled and subsequently adopted Moodle – a more user-friendly, free open source VLE which staff responded to positively. The College management team were in favour of Moodle in terms of cost savings, and it also fit with the college’s revised ILT strategy.

Showcase and training sessions took place to promote the benefits to all staff, however, despite these sessions, there were still only small pockets of staff using the VLE. The Academic Management Team wanted all staff to use Moodle to support teaching and learning.

The activity

Learning Technologist Dave Shearan and ILT Co-ordinator Richard Booth came up with the ‘Minimum Moodle Content’ initiative – a requirement for all staff to add their course(s) to Moodle and include a minimum set of materials such as the scheme of work and course information.

Richard and Dave adopted a friendly and encouraging approach to staff by highlighting the benefits of using Moodle.

Richard says, “This really helped to shape those course areas that were reluctant to use it - in one particular case, it changed the attitude of the staff who initially felt that Moodle was too time consuming. They are now one of the best areas in the college for using it.”

He adds, “It also demonstrated how serious the management team was, although despite them making Minimum Moodle Content compulsory, there was still reluctance from some course areas.”

After 12 months of the project, Richard and Dave felt they could develop it further and encourage more staff to recognise the benefits of using Moodle. They devised ‘Moodle Maturity’ – a self-assessment process which enables tutors to evaluate their current position with Moodle, and how they can progress. Currently in its second year, Moodle Maturity is compulsory for all full-time and substantial part-time courses.

The self-assessment consists of 7 criteria:

- Presence on Moodle
- Course information
- Layout and appearance
- Course resources
• Communication assessment
• Student interaction

Each criteria is assessed as either ‘Not addressed’, ‘Baseline’, ‘Effective’ and ‘Exemplary.’ (not addressed represents a course where there is no Moodle presence).

When Moodle Maturity launched in 2009, Richard and Dave ran drop in workshops and went through the process with each member of staff.

Richard says, “We kept chasing tutors, programme leaders and heads of schools until we had 100% completion. After gathering all the Moodle Maturity assessments, Dave and I double checked them so any course that stood out (ie. someone with insufficient content citing themselves as exemplary) could be re-addressed.”

The outcomes

140 courses were self-assessed through Moodle Maturity in May 2009 and 111 of those were ‘baseline’ or above. The Principal set a deadline of November 2009 for those remaining ‘not addressed’ courses to achieve at least baseline. In February 2010, only a handful of those courses remained unaddressed.

Richard says, “Some of the practical areas initially didn’t see the relevance of Moodle so we sat down with the tutors and showed them how to structure a course. Through perseverance, they can now see the benefits. The self-assessment form is used to make suggestions as to how they can improve. It’s a big step forward.”

Richard says, “As there is an expectation to do Moodle Maturity, staff approach us for help with specific elements (ie. online assignments) which has picked up a lot of people. In turn, their colleagues see the benefits and want to join in. We also run an ICT MOT skills initiative where staff assess their training needs. This is done through Moodle so those members of staff who had never used the VLE had to log on to do the assessment so we also picked up staff that way.”

He adds, “We hardly ever run formalised training sessions now as there isn’t the demand – it’s much more about working with individuals.”

The impact

Moodle is becoming an integral part of college life and it is incorporated into SARS, appraisals, teaching observations, mini-inspections and LRC inductions.

Richard adds, “When a new member of staff starts at the college, their line manager contacts myself and Dave straight away for a run through with Moodle. By doing this, it’s embedded and we want to get to a stage where Moodle is just second nature to everyone. It’s about getting the tutors to use Moodle, rather than having an all-singing and dancing VLE which nobody uses.”
The Moodle log files show that staff and students are using the VLE extensively with evidence also indicating increased usage off campus in the evenings.

Richard and Dave believe there is still a lot to do and recognise that it has taken a few years to get to this point.

Richard adds, “It doesn’t happen overnight and for anyone looking to run a similar project, I would say be patient and don’t expect too much too soon. Base it on a long-term strategy - it takes time.”

Richard also advises other learning providers to:

- Get SMT support. If you don’t have this support, there will be no endorsement to use it
- Speak to colleges who have used Moodle to get their views
- Don’t give someone with a teaching role the responsibility of also looking after the VLE. You need a dedicated member of staff who has the time to devote to it

Richard says, “Our future plans include more of the same. We are hoping for good things from the next Moodle Maturity assessment and are sure there will have been improvements. We have also had interest from other colleges about the project and would be happy to share our experiences with others.”

**Case study update**

Moodle Maturity is now in its fourth year and the college has continued to see year on year improvements. There has been an increase in the number of ‘baseline’ and ‘effective’ courses with many tutors now using online assessment, recognising the benefits of using the VLE to engage with students both in and outside of the classroom.

Richard Booth, ILT Co-ordinator says;

“Quick wins such as using things like quizzes, blogs and reflective journals in Moodle have helped a lot of tutors to take their courses to the next level. We have a very small number of ‘unaddressed’ courses but something as simple as making sure that students are added to the course ensures at least ‘baseline’ criteria.”

Richard says, “Some tutors who have really developed their Moodle courses have reported more consistency in students’ grades and even improvements in some cases. Students are also a lot more active in sessions and are more responsive.”

Art, Media, ICT and Sports saw the biggest increases in 2011 across their Moodle courses with examples including:

- Increase in ‘Exemplary’ for ‘Presence on Moodle’ (up from 4% to 14%)
• Increase in ‘Effective’ for ‘Course Information’ (up from 39% to 59%)

• Increase in ‘Effective’ for ‘Course Resources’ (up from 44% to 49%)

The college has also seen a number of areas become ‘exemplary’ - something which at the start of the Moodle Maturity initiative did not happen.

Richard says, “We have showcased examples of good Moodle practice at our annual sharing fair. This has helped to encourage other members of staff to look more closely at their use of Moodle, and move their course to the next level.”

The senior management team at the college continue to endorse Moodle Maturity having recognised the impact that it has had on the organisation.

Richard adds, “Future plans include working with the tutors in response to the ‘what next’ question on the self-assessment report, by identifying any training needs to help them achieve their development goals. The aim also is to still move any not addressed courses to at least baseline and I will be working closely with Programme Leaders to achieve this.”

Useful links

Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology

Jisc RSC West Midlands

Moodle

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