Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology - Getting started with social media for teaching and learning

Summary
Staff at Shrewsbury College are embracing social media thanks to a successful pilot project, stringent policy and procedures, and enthusiasm generated at an annual college staff development conference. Tutors have reported benefits including better communications and in some instances, improved grades and retention.

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.

The challenge
Until 2012, staff and students at Shrewsbury College did not have access to any social media websites in the college environment for safeguarding reasons.

Increasingly, staff wanted access to Facebook and Twitter to support teaching and learning, and as a way of communicating more effectively with learners using technologies that they were familiar with. Several meetings took place to discuss why the college did not have access, and the pros and cons of making social media available for all staff and students. Discussions concluded that there was sufficient potential benefit to open up social media.

The activity
During academic year 2011/12, ILT & Digital Marketing Developer Richard Booth was asked by SMT to produce a social media policy to include a set of guidelines for those wanting to set up Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Richard says, “It was a good way of getting the ball rolling - making sure that we had safeguarding measures in place and a process for staff to follow from the outset, rather than setting up the social media sites and then working our way through it
It also gave staff confidence to start using social media knowing that there was a safety net in place."

Richard consulted the Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands and researched examples of other social media policies, as well as other colleges’ use of Facebook and Twitter. He then created a bespoke policy for Shrewsbury College which includes their ‘code of conduct’ – this helps to re-enforce expectations of both staff and students.

With the policy and guidelines in place, Richard worked with tutors from the Level 3 Sport Diploma course. They expressed an early interest in using Facebook for additional communication with their students, and agreed to be the pilot course before social media was rolled out to the rest of the college.

Richard says, “The first step was to help the tutors set up Facebook accounts that are linked to their college email address, and ensure that the profile is only viewable by friends. This ensures that the profile is hidden from Internet searches and prevents people from confusing a college account with a personal account. I also advised the tutors not to accept students as friends."

Instead of advising tutors to create Facebook ‘pages’, Richard recommended creating ‘groups’ as the process was easier and provided more of a sense of community. It also enabled the College to keep the groups closed (private) which is not possible with pages.

**The outcomes**

Sports tutors used Facebook to:

- Remind students to hand in assignments
- Update students on match fixtures
- Facilitate discussions on topical news and events i.e. the Olympics
- Share resources and link back to the college’s Moodle VLE
- Provide a platform for additional help and support

The pilot was well received with 75% of learners engaging with it. 93% stated that using Facebook made it easier to communicate with staff. One tutor said, “It’s a great way to get in touch with students, particularly when they are not in college. It’s immediate.”

Richard used the annual staff conference as a platform to launch the use of social media. Coupled with a session delivered by the Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands on using social media for teaching and learning, the conference generated a lot of enthusiasm amongst staff.

He says, “A lot of staff who had never used social media became interested and inspired. The outcome of the Sports pilot helped to re-enforce the benefits and for them, hearing that a fellow tutor was using it made it more realistic and achievable.”

Shortly after the conference, more and more staff members approached Richard to ask for help with setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Richard says, “The agreement from the outset was that the VLE would still be the primary focus. We didn’t want to disadvantage the students who didn’t want to be on social media and there was concern that staff would potentially stop using Moodle.

[www.jiscrsc.uk/casestudies](http://www.jiscrsc.uk/casestudies)
The tutors are strongly encouraged and reminded that when posting resources in Facebook, they need to link back to Moodle.”

Some of the benefits of using social media reported by the tutors include:

- Easier access to staff and students
- Immediacy – those students who use social media generally regularly check and reply to messages, wall postings etc
- Facilitates more discussion – the forums in Moodle often didn’t work whereas social media has fostered better communications and rapport between student and tutors
- Students use social media to inform tutors if they are unable to get to college, and request work to be getting on with. This would not have happened previously, social media has therefore provided a means to extend learner engagement with resources and activities in Moodle.

**The impact**

Since launching social media, there are currently 41 Facebook groups in place across subject areas ranging from Art & Design, Catering, Health and Social Care and Trade Union Studies. These groups are consistently used; none of them have been set up and then left which has happened in the past with Moodle courses.

Richard says, “Once tutors saw how easy it was to set up and start using social media, it really encouraged them. As a result, we have seen improved confidence levels in staff use of ILT in general, as they are enthused to try new things. Staff have supported and encouraged each other to have a go and the word has spread.”

Richard adds, “There has also been an increased use of Moodle with online assignments becoming increasingly popular. Social media has also helped with distance learning, part-time courses and those students in the work place. Although we had Moodle to support this, Facebook and Twitter have provided an additional platform of support and communication for students who generally don’t get to interact regularly on a face-to-face basis. There has been a marked difference with those students who previously didn’t communicate very well. Improved communications is a real benefit to distance learners, who can easily feel isolated.”

On the flipside, some staff have complained that their students are now constantly on social media in lessons.

Richard adds, “We are hesitant to start restricting access as this goes against what we are trying to encourage and achieve. If we blocked access completely, students would still be able to access social media sites through 3G on their phones. Some staff have counteracted this by allowing 5 minutes at the start of the lesson for students to check their social media. It’s also something that we can look at in lesson observations as perhaps there is an issue with delivery or classroom management that we can work with staff to counteract.”

**The lessons learned**

Richard has the following advice for learning providers who may be considering the use of social media:

- Post regularly and keep the content current
- Setting up a pilot with a specific course really helped to re-enforce the message and gave credence to the rest of the staff. “If we had simply opened
it up and let people get on with it, we wouldn’t have had the take up that we have had.”

- Getting buy-in from management is important
- It’s imperative to have guidelines and procedures in place – staff feel supported that if issues occur, there is something to fall back on
- Don’t be swayed into immediately restricting access if problems occur – review it at the end of the academic year
- Make sure that you remind staff about the privacy settings.

Useful links

Shrewsbury College website

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