Thanet College: Carpentry lecturer combines Web 2.0 with Moodle to keep erratic learning on track

Summary

Carpentry is not a subject that traditionally lends itself to e-learning. However, in the space of just 18 months, a carpentry lecturer at Thanet College has transformed the teaching and learning of this vocational area into a model of ILT delivery by interweaving Web 2.0 technologies such as Google Docs into sophisticated and advanced Moodle courses. The results are carpentry classes with a difference!

About Thanet College

Located in Broadstairs near Ramsgate, Thanet College is the largest provider of education and training in East Kent, as well as being a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in Catering and Hospitality. The College is able to offer an extensive range of full-time, part-time, distance-learning and community-based courses, as well as being experienced Corporate Trainers. With over 1800 full-time students and 6000 part-time learners, Thanet offers a range of training and education courses across the board, with a strong emphasis on employer-focused training.

The challenge

With over 25 years’ experience in carpentry and joinery, including managing his own joinery business for 17 years, Andy Dodds joined Thanet College as a Carpentry and Joinery Lecturer in August 2008.

During his time in industry, Dodds had become familiar with certain aspects of IT for running the accounts and administration of his own business, but would not have considered himself an expert by any stretch of the imagination. It did not take long for the ILT bug to bite! Dodds recalls: “I was inspired by our e-Learning Coordinator, Geoff Rebbeck, during my College induction. As soon as I saw The Learning Curve, Thanet’s virtual learning environment, I was hooked. What really appealed to me was the idea that carpentry students – many of whom are studying while they hold down jobs - could access information from anywhere and at any time. During my time in industry, I had often
been disappointed with the standard of teaching for my own apprentices and I was
determined to do a better job.”

The activity

Dodds immediately set to work developing a Moodle course for the Level 1
Construction Diploma in Carpentry and Joinery. He started off with a traditional mix
of paper-based and electronic resources. He was supported whole-heartedly by his
course leader Dave Petts and Head of Section Deb Wilson by providing him with a
half day a week to develop his e-learning resources. In no time at all, he had created
the backbone of a Carpentry Moodle course including:

- Demonstration videos
- PowerPoint presentations
- Word documents
- Moodle quizzes
- Online assignment tasks
- Lists of website links

One of several Carpentry Moodle courses created by Andy Dodds

Over a period of 12 months, Dodd’s skills and confidence grew as he began to
explore, experiment and expand. He has now developed and refined several
Carpentry Moodle courses into a sophisticated blend of traditional VLE and Web 2.0
resources – so much so that all of his carpentry students now have Google Docs
accounts. Examples of this content are given below:
• The Moodle courses now double up as a Schemes of Work

• A Late Section opens a Google Form that allows information to be placed directly into the tutor’s own personal spreadsheet

• The ‘Google Form to Google Spreadsheet’ technique is also used for capturing all relevant student information which the students complete themselves, thus saving the lecturer hours of administration time

• Text Tools are used to send ‘reminders’ to students via their mobile phones

• Lesson plans are always placed in the staff-only areas so that any cover tutor can run a class in the lecturer’s absence

• Hyperlinks to PDF versions of text books save students the expense of buying paper publications

• Learning outcomes are spelled out clearly on all the Moodle courses

• Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) include personal targets with deadlines which are monitored

• Progress Reviews allow students to monitor their own progress with respect to quizzes, City & Guilds tests, online assignments, activity sheets and practicals

• Use of the Messaging System not only keeps learners in touch but also allows shy or reticent students to ask for help discreetly

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**Stair terminology**

Stairs provide access from one floor to another. Each continuous set of steps running in one direction is called a flight.

Can you name all the components labelled opposite?

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*Bringing Carpentry to life using interactive PowerPoint presentations*
Dodds is also now teaching full-time Level 1 and 2 students, which means a tutorial session once a week. He is already putting the VLE to good use in this area. Dodds gives an example: “We were practicing writing letters of application. I converted their first attempts into anonymous PDFs then stored them on the VLE as a resource to help demonstrate good and bad practice.”

**The outcomes**

The acid test for any e-learning initiative is whether it works or not; and the best people to ask are the students themselves.

*Rodney Ward, mature learner aged 56, enrolled on the course in order to move into a trade job after being made redundant.*

“I’ve not been at school for some 30 odd years, but must just say I can remember that we all worked on the same thing at the same time. Being able to work at your own speed is brilliant. When something is difficult, I can put in extra time to complete an assignment; and when it’s easy, I don’t have to wait for the rest of the class to catch up. Coming into a classroom environment is not something I have done for some while and I was apprehensive. However, I have found this experience quite enjoyable and being able to access information at home has made all the difference for me.”

*Leon Zanre, aged 22, wants to complete the course as quickly as possible due to a terminal medical condition. He would like to enter University, so plans to complete Level 1 and 2 within one year.*

"The system that I am using this year in woodwork and joinery is very helpful as it allows me so much more freedom to get on with my work with no pressure. It allows me to go at my own pace and achieve the grades that I want. The VLE is very easy to use and help is always there when I need it. Due to my serious lung condition, I am in and out of hospital all the time. The system allows me to do work at home and in the library at the campus to catch up."

*Dane Marchant, aged 19, is a 2nd year Diploma student who was taught using a paper-based system in his first year.*

"This year, we can upload our work online which is so much easier. If there are any problems with our work, we can just log on to The Learning Curve and update it instead of getting my folder out, going through paperwork and re-printing a new sheet. I find that typing work is a lot easier and quicker for me to get it completed. The VLE allows us to see exactly what needs to be done, when it needs to be done by and how well we are doing, including a percentage to see what grade we are working at. We can see comments written by the tutor in our Personal Learning Plans. It’s also better because, if we get behind, we can do catch up work anywhere that we can get onto the internet instead of just doing the paper work in college."

*Jonathon Veness, aged 21, is a profoundly deaf 2nd year Diploma Student who is supported with a signer in the group.*
“I think this year has been better than last year because everything has been online. It has made the course more interesting for me. I don’t have to carry a big folder of my work with me everywhere as everything is saved online. I find it easier and more helpful to be able to research my work online than try and find it in the course folder which was slow and frustrating.”

**John Murphy is a maths teacher in secondary education and is enrolled on the Level 1 Diploma part-time course as he seeks to change career into the carpentry trade.**

"The key issue in making my decision to take a day off work in order to study for a carpentry/joinery diploma was that to avoid treading water and wasting time. The work itself cannot be differentiated but the time scale for the completion of the work can and has been. Simultaneously, keeping set deadlines in place whilst allowing for completed theory sections to be submitted, marked and completed before the deadline is exactly what mature students are looking for. This course provides it.

“The framework of the course has allowed me to progress at my own speed on the theory side, which has given me more time to work on my practical skills. At this Level 1 stage, being able to spend additional hours in the workshop once I have completed the theory sections has been far more beneficial to me and to my interests in gaining employment in the carpentry industry.”

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**The impact**

Dodds believes passionately in providing the right IT skills to his carpentry students so that they can take full advantage of the e-learning techniques he is using to deliver the curriculum. “In the first few lessons, we do nothing on carpentry and just concentrate on support for the VLE, essential PC knowledge, understanding file formats and so on. Each time they come across a new task that they cannot do – such as creating a drawing using Microsoft Word – I take the time to upgrade their skills.
“The main thing about using The Learning Curve VLE in this way is that it gives the students ownership. They have a clear and well defined idea of where they are on a course at any time. Targets are concisely defined and learners can readily see their growth and achievements.

“I have one student who, due to personal circumstances, will simply not attend theory classes and only comes into College for practicals. But because of Moodle’s home-working facilities, this student will definitely finish the course. This just could not have taken place before.

“The very nature of the course attracts some students who may have personal problems that can potentially impede their learning – from criminality to drug abuse. In one instance, one of my students was prevented from attending College for six weeks due to a restraining order from the courts. By using the VLE, not only was he able to keep up with the course, but by the time he returned to lessons he was actually ahead of the rest of the class.”

Lecturers like Andy Dodds do not sit still and he has plenty of plans for future development. “I would like to record my own demonstration videos to enhance the teaching of practical techniques. I would also like to start recording class discussions as audio files – particularly for tutorial work. Another development I want to see is more student-created work being placed on the VLE for use as resources by other learners – particularly wikis.”

It’s been an incredible journey for Dodds – from carpenter to lecturer to e-mature exploiter of e-learning in less than 18 months. One thing is for sure, carpentry courses at Thanet College will never be the same again.

Useful links

Thanet College

Moodle

Google Docs (Wikipedia)

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