Newcastle Under Lyme College: Teaching and Learning Committee

Summary

Staff at Newcastle-under-Lyme College (NULC) established a committee to help encourage staff to make effective and innovative use of technology to enhance teaching and learning. The group has helped to save the College time and money, introduced new technologies and provided a platform for sharing good practice and delivering CPD opportunities.

About Newcastle-under-Lyme College

Newcastle-under-Lyme College is a highly successful tertiary college based in North Staffordshire. A £60m building opened in January 2010 and provides staff and students with some of the country's finest learning facilities.

The College has grown significantly over the past 10 years and is currently home to a population of around 3,600 full-time students and over 400 students on higher education programmes. In addition, there are over 800 part-time adult learners, around 1400 employees of local companies on work-based training programmes and over 1250 apprentices.

The challenge

Within the College, there were numerous examples of effective use of technology for teaching and learning. However, these were not widely known about. The College needed a mechanism for sharing good practice amongst staff, gathering together key technology innovators, and providing a more joined up approach to purchasing technology.
The activity

Gavin Barker, Coordinator (Teaching & Assessment Technology) set up the Teaching and Learning forum. The idea was to bring technology enthusiasts together on a regular basis, to share ideas, explore new technologies, discuss innovative ways of using technology in teaching and learning and to use the forum as a platform to deliver CPD.

Gavin says, “Initially I asked Heads of Faculty to suggest possible members - they recommended staff that are innovative with technology and who are prepared to push the boundaries.”

The forum operates on a voluntary basis and features representatives from across the College. There are currently around 20 members but it is not a closed group – anyone can join at any time.

Forum members meet once a month for one hour and discuss a series of agenda items which are informed by discussion at previous meetings, attendance at conferences, requests sent to Gavin by forum and staff members, and sometimes by SMT, who may ask the forum to discuss something specific. Gavin presents ideas discussed at the forum to the Director of Curriculum on a regular basis, and feeds back to the College’s Core Planning Team. Minutes from the meetings are circulated amongst Heads of Faculty and other interested parties.

Gavin adds, “We have also invited technology suppliers in to present to us – we include our technical team as part of this to ensure that the technology will work with our existing systems.”

Examples of topics discussed by the forum recently include:

- **Social media** – the group is investigating the use of social networking sites such as Facebook for teaching and learning;
- **Graphics Tablets** – the group is currently investigating how graphics tablets could be used effectively in a group environment to aid teaching and learning.
- **Voting systems** – the group is exploring several options with a view to purchasing a system to support classroom assessment.
The outcomes

The group has generated a number of developments including:

- **Innovative Teaching Idea of the Week** – an idea is submitted by staff each week and showcased on the College’s VLE. Ideas have included the use of ‘Prezi’ presentations in teaching and using mobile phones for revision. The ideas can be voted on and discussed in an online forum with a prize awarded for the best idea on a termly basis. Ideas have also been incorporated into lesson observations which, in turn, have been adopted more widely across the College.

- **Instant Feedback Tool** – a forum member wanted something to capture timely feedback from students. The Instant Feedback Tool was developed and has been shared across the College. The tool allows students to ‘tap’ the SmartBoard on their way out of class to provide instant, anonymous feedback.

- **Development and acceptance of an online lesson plan template** – as a result of group discussions and recommendations, the college has now accepted into its procedure that an online lesson plan (following the online lesson plan template) will suffice as evidence of planning, rather than staff having to complete paper based lesson plans.

- **Investment in the ClickView video hosting system** – this enables staff and learners to access video resources both internally and externally to help stretch and challenge all learners.

- **Additional college purchases** – a weather station and a number of additional laptops for learners following group attendance at the annual BETT conference.

- **Purchase of Turnitin** software to detect and deter plagiarism and improve online assessment feedback for learners.

- **Staff development opportunities** – forum members deliver 15-minute micro CPD sessions at college staff development days. Topics include SmartBoard games for teaching, creating Prezis and the Instant Feedback Tool. Sessions are filmed and added to the College’s VLE.

Gavin says, “As a result of the committee, there is now a college consensus in relation to the procurement of technology. Departments consult with us about technology solutions and the Director of Curriculum will check with us, upon receipt of a purchase order, if the solution they want to buy has been discussed with the forum first. There have been instances where we have pointed departments towards free alternatives which have saved the College money. We have also made staff aware that some of the solutions they wanted to buy already existed in the College.”

He adds, “The forum is like a democracy and, importantly, we have backing from SMT. Managers respect our decisions and having the College’s IT and technical support staff on board ensures things get done.”
The impact

The committee has had a significant impact at Newcastle under Lyme College:

- The group makes a considered approach to purchasing technology for the College which saves money and time wasted on training staff on technologies that are not suitable for the organisation. Open source and free alternatives are sought where appropriate.
- Examples of effective technology use are disseminated widely and the reach is evident through the VLE statistics. The Innovative Teaching Idea of the Week receives approximately 450-500 hits per week – between 75 and 130 of these hits are from unique visitors.
- Ideas from the Innovative Teaching Idea of the Week are being incorporated into lesson observations to enhance teaching and learning.
- The adoption of Turnititin, purchased as a result of the committee’s discussions, has encouraged tutors to make more of use of the Moodle VLE. One tutor reported better results on an Extended Level 2 Project after showing the students how to put the assignment Through Turnitin – this encouraged them to re-think their referencing methods.

Liz Wyman, Learning Resources Manager and committee member adds, “The group has also secured funding from LSIS for a CPD project to film and host staff development sessions on the VLE and ClickView online, the College’s video library.

“The funding is for additional cameras and staff training on how to film the staff development sessions. Staff can watch the videos at any time to either catch up on missed sessions or refresh their memory. So far we have had really positive feedback including comments from staff who felt they didn’t need additional Turnitin training as the videos had given them enough confidence to have a go.”

The lessons learned

Gavin and Liz have the following advice for anyone thinking of setting up a
similar group in their organisation:

- You need keen volunteers who genuinely want to use technology to enhance teaching and learning.
- SMT backing is crucial – they need to have trust in what the group recommends.
- Don’t have too many meetings – keep them short and focused. Let the committee suggest agenda items (as well as SMT) as this gives them ownership of the agenda.
- Encourage staff to go to conferences such as BETT and visit other learning providers to generate ideas. The e-learning case studies on the Excellence Gateway are another great source of inspiration.
- Don’t badge it as a technology forum – this could put people off and give them the wrong impression of what the group is about.
- Get technical staff involved – they need to be involved in the early stages when purchasing technology.

Gavin adds, “The next step is to get our learners more involved – after all, they are our customers. We did try and get the learners involved in the committee but as we only had a couple of attendees, we didn’t feel it was a fair representation of the student body. We aim to address this by setting up a learner focus group.”

Further plans that the committee will investigate and hope to take forward include the use of students’ own mobile devices for teaching and learning.

**Useful links**

- Newcastle-under-Lyme College
- BETT conference
- JISC RSC West Midlands

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