Hereford Sixth Form College: Embracing Social Media for Marketing, Communication, Teaching & Learning

Summary
Thanks to an open minded approach and a desire to meet the needs of its students, staff at Hereford Sixth Form College have embraced social media to support marketing activity and the curriculum. Improved communications, time saved and a greener approach to producing lesson materials are just some of the benefits reported by the College since embracing the technology that is so widely used, particularly amongst young people.

About Hereford Sixth Form College
Hereford Sixth Form College (HSFC) is a Beacon Status College that was judged ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted at the last inspection. It offers a broad general education in a caring and supportive environment that enables students to gain the qualifications needed to enter higher education or employment. Opportunities are also available to participate in a wide range of enrichment activities such as Sport and Drama, Young Enterprise, the Student Representative Council and the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

The College attracts students from Herefordshire, Wales and the surrounding counties with many travelling a considerable distance. It is housed in purpose-built accommodation including specialist classrooms and laboratories, a Performing Arts Centre, a Music Centre, a Sports Hall and Fitness Centre. The Student Services area includes a Library & Learning Resources Centre, a specialist Careers Library, a Well-Being Centre and an IT Centre. There is also a student cafe and a large study and social area (the Pavilion).

The challenge
The Marketing Department could see a value in using social media as a cheap and immediate way of communicating with past, present and future students. The Senior Management Team (SMT) were also aware of an increasing number of staff using social media for teaching and learning.
The College wanted to embrace social media and for curriculum use, in particular, needed to work with staff to use it correctly and ensure that the organisation met safeguarding regulations.

**The activity**
In 2010, after research was undertaken, Angie Cheasley, HSFC’s Marketing Officer, set up a corporate Facebook page and Twitter feed for marketing and recruitment purposes. These were branded featuring the College logo and named accordingly.

As time progressed, the corporate Facebook and Twitter pages saw an increase in the number of followers ranging from current and pre-entry students, to alumni and local organisations.

Following the initial success of the corporate pilot, Ruth Figg, Business Tutor, set up curriculum pages for those subjects who wanted to use social media, ensuring that the privacy settings were correct in order to meet safeguarding obligations.

She explains, “We used the prefix ‘HSFC’ followed by the subject name. This gives a corporate identity to the pages so that staff and students know that they are working safely within the College framework. Each Facebook page also features a prominent message explaining that the page is monitored by staff and that bullying, discrimination or profanity will be grounds for disciplinary action.”

On the curriculum side, the College didn’t want social media to take over from the VLE so everything that is posted on Facebook and Twitter is also posted on the VLE, which encourages students to use both platforms.

Social media use is optional for staff however training is compulsory for everyone - staff that want a Facebook or Twitter page need to be aware of the privacy settings. Each subject area has a designated staff member who is responsible for posting content. Ruth also monitors each curriculum page on a daily basis.

**Examples of social media (curriculum) include:**

**Sociology**
Tutor, John Pratt, uses Twitter to push out news and current affairs items to his students. At the start of term, John highlights his Twitter page and asks his students to follow him but he does not follow any of them.

He says, “It’s so quick and easy, and is more time efficient than producing hand-outs – it’s something that I can do whilst travelling. I follow relevant organisations and so it’s easy to retweet something that I think will be of interest. Similarly, the students will send me relevant links via Twitter which may often relate to something we have discussed in class.”

**Business Studies**
Ruth Figg uses a Facebook page with her students and finds it particularly useful for posting revision and exam advice and links to case studies. She says, “I re-post information from the VLE forums and website but also inform students of new books that have arrived in the Library to encourage them to visit. I also use Facebook for book reviews and polls.”

**Examples of social media (corporate) use:**

- Notifying students of College closures. HSFC is in a rural area and students often travel a great distance to get to College

[www.jiscrsc.uk/casestudies](http://www.jiscrsc.uk/casestudies)
• Advertising events such as open days, guest speakers attending the College
• Viral marketing - the Mayor’s office and local counsellors often retweet HSFC posts which reaches local charities and businesses
• Turning a complaint into good PR – a local resident complained about litter dropping. A group of HSFC students collected the litter and the College tweeted about it. This reached the original complainant who thanked the College for its prompt action
• A mechanism for inviting high profile alumni (e.g. Paralympic Medallists) to a collaborative Freshers’ Fayre event

The outcomes
Ruth and Angie outline the benefits of using Social media at HSFC:

• It’s accessible and current – the students are familiar with and like the technology
• It’s engaging for students outside the classroom – extension activities (whilst travelling to College, at home)
• Facebook is a visual hook and lends itself to visual learning
• Facilitates pro-active rather than reactive marketing
• It’s quick and easy to update and doesn’t involve extensive research for resources

Angie says, “One of the main areas we are struggling with is perception. Some students think it’s ‘not cool’ to like or follow a College social media page, and others have concerns that ‘liking’ a page on Facebook means that the page administrator will automatically be able to view their profile. Similarly, some staff feel there is greater separation with Twitter as you can create completely separate accounts.” Ruth says, “staff development sessions covering privacy settings and guidance for students will help to address some of these concerns and encourage more use of social media. Even if the students decide not to like our pages or follow us, it will help to educate them for their own personal use.”

Sam Cotton an A2 Business Studies Student says, "It's very useful as it highlights relevant business studies topic information that I can access on my phone wherever I am. I use it to add to what I learn in the classroom and it provides opportunities for additional reading. Excellent for topical case study material that is found by teachers!"

Andy Douthwaite, Head of the PE Department says, “Our Facebook pages have helped resolve the significant issues we used to experience as a department in keeping students informed as to the state of play regarding fixtures and team selection. Students have come to rely solely on the Facebook page for information update and it has resulted in redundant notice boards. Within minutes of posting you know that information has reached its intended destination. Students have utilised the page to liaise and organise with other students which has significantly reduced match day workloads.”

The impact
The College currently has (as of January 2013) 18 active Facebook pages and 5 Twitter pages. In the second year of the pilot, the College saw a three-fold increase in the number of followers.
Angie says, “We have seen an increase in the number of pre-entry students liking the corporate Facebook page and it would be interesting to find out how many of those convert to students joining us at the start of the next academic year.”

The social media pilot has been very successful and has made a significant impact at the College:

- Business Studies has seen a spike in VLE usage – Ruth believes that social media has been a contributing factor.
- Social media has helped teachers save time – those using Facebook and Twitter no longer have to spend a significant amount of time finding resources. They can simply re-post and retweet relevant content which takes seconds.
- Using social media is greener and saves paper as staff using Facebook and/or Twitter no longer prepare printed hand-outs.
- It has changed the teaching delivery for some staff and encouraged them to use more technology. English teacher Joe Nicholas has been enthused by social media and has learnt from his students.
- Communication is much easier and quicker. Facebook and Twitter has helped to divert unnecessary phone calls away from the College reception (i.e. bad weather closures).
- Social media has helped to raise the profile of the College. Recruitment figures have constantly increased against the demographic flattening off.

Ruth says, “Moving forward we will continue to push the use of social media. Our social media policy is a work in progress and currently contained within the IT user policy so we will be looking at that in more detail in the next phase.”

She concludes, “By embracing social media rather than turning our backs on it, HSFC has made communications safer and moved it into the right generation. Before social media, the argument was that students should adapt to the College’s needs and this is not the case. The students are our customers and we need to be where they are.”

The lessons learned
Ruth and Angie have the following advice for learning providers who want to embrace social media:

- Use it in harmony with your VLE – this will help increase traffic and encourage further use
- Use a company like NetNatives to help you consolidate any non-corporate pages that students may have set up themselves. This took HSFC’s Facebook followers from 700 to over 1,200
- Ensure that your privacy settings are correct before officially launching to staff and students
- Be aware of Facebook changing their privacy settings – this can happen on a fairly regular basis
- It would have been useful to get the RSC in to give us some guidance and perhaps point us in the direction of a social media policy template that people could pick up and use
- Ensure that you keep the pages current – post regularly and communicate with your audience by responding to comments

www.jiscrsc.uk/casestudies
Useful links

- Hereford Sixth Form College
- Hereford Sixth Form College Facebook
- Hereford Sixth Form College Twitter
- NetNatives

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