City College Brighton and Hove: Music students get serious with social networking

Summary

The use of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace within the learning and skills sector divides educational professionals. Some feel that providers should embrace these Web 2.0 tools to increase engagement, others feel the casual and often frivolous content within these channels has no place in the classroom. The Music Department at City College Brighton and Hove has created its own Brighton Records Facebook, MySpace and Twitter sites to allow its students to brand and market their own work as well as promote their skills to prospective employers. By emulating the professional deployment of Web 2.0 technologies prevalent in the music industry today, students have learnt how to make serious use of social networking sites, resulting in improved recruitment, retention, engagement and attainment.

About City College Brighton and Hove

City College is the largest post-16 learning provider in Brighton and Hove providing 1000 courses and qualifications to more than 10,000 full- and part-time students. The College has a pivotal role to play in raising the skills and aspirations of the city’s residents and contributing to sustainable local economic development. The College delivers learning opportunities from entry level to foundation degrees across a broad range of curriculum areas. Provision includes: occupational skills training for 14-16 year olds in conjunction with local schools; a broad vocational and professional learning offer that attracts increasing numbers of full-time 16-18 year olds; high-quality and flexible workforce development programmes aimed at local employers and employees; higher education courses in partnership with the University of Brighton; a broad range of adult and community learning opportunities; and a well-established learning programme for international students.

The challenge

The Music Department at City College Brighton and Hove offers two BTEC Extended Diploma Level 3 courses; one in Music Technology and the other in Music Performing/Composing. Jason Murphy, Team Leader and Music Tutor, is constantly striving to provide his students with the best preparation for their chosen careers by exposing them to current professional practices.
Jason explains: “In today’s music scene, musicians, sound engineers, composers and other related professionals make their living via social networking media. This has now become one of the prime methods of downloading songs, promoting artists and finding employment within the industry, and that includes the major record labels.”

Although the majority of students on his music courses already have their own MySpace and Facebook areas when they first enrol, their use is limited to typical social-networking activities such as informal chat, gossip and sharing of photographs. Jason observes: “They arrive at the College with no experience of using these online facilities as a branding and marketing tool, which is precisely how the modern music industry promotes, sells and distributes music, gigs, festivals and technologies as well as being the main channel for recruitment. The challenge was to get our students to transform the way they use social networking by adopting the same professional working practices being employed on Web 2.0 channels throughout the music sector today.”

**The activity**

Brighton Records was established four years ago as a College ‘record label’, complete with its own website to support the Music Technology and Music Performing/Composing courses offered by City College Brighton and Hove. However, this was initially just a branding front which was maintained by the tutors. Jason wanted to take things much further: “We wanted to emulate music-industry online practice, so we created the Brighton Records Facebook, MySpace and Twitter areas, all of which are supported by online music-sharing networking sites such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp.”

The project was started at the beginning of the 2010/11 academic year, immediately after the College reformed its e-safety policies and started allowing social networking sites to be used on-site. Andy Clowe, e-Learning Coordinator, recalls: “As an organisation, we took the strategic decision in the summer of 2010 to enable less restricted student access to the internet, provided the request came from a lecturer and both students and lecturers involved had completed the College e-safety awareness course. We took this decision after reviewing evidence of how Web 2.0 sites in particular could potentially benefit teaching and learning.”

Initially, Brighton Records just had a presence on MySpace, but after consulting with the students, the College decided to add Facebook and Twitter. As a result, Jason has effectively handed over control to the students, allowing them to post anything that they think will be useful for their future careers onto the Web 2.0 area in order to brand and promote both their music and their expertise. Jason explains: “We have effectively turned the Brighton Records Facebook and MySpace areas into employer-facing e-portfolios, where students can showcase their work and promote themselves – in exactly the same way they will be doing in their professional careers.”
“The biggest hurdle is getting the students to change their perceptions of social networking and realise that Facebook and the like can and are be used as work conduits...Once my students realised that the Brighton Records social networking channels replicated industry practice and that using Facebook or MySpace professionally was how they were going to make their living, their content became much more serious and work orientated.”

~ Jason Murphy, Team Leader & Music Tutor

The outcomes

As a result of this project, students now use the online networking tools to promote shows, CD releases and their own freelance work (such as live sound engineering and production). They use Moodle forums to discuss business proposals for Brighton Records promotions throughout the city and have set up links with a large number of venues to run events throughout the year. In addition, the online networking tools are used for communication with other students around the College to facilitate the provision of music for in-house film and performing-arts shows. Finally, they have procured the services of students on Art courses to generate CD covers and poster artwork to support the record label.

The use of Web 2.0 communication tools has enabled these Music students to gain a practical understanding of how they can be used as a 'real world' marketing tool. For example, they promoted a charity event at the Latest Music Bar in Brighton in aid of Gambia Relief and raised in excess of £150. Students are able to gain recognition for and interest in the work they do from industry professionals. They currently have online friends and followers that include publishers, record-label agents, charities, performing artists, film makers, journalists and radio stations. This provides a context for learning and acts as a source of inspiration for the students, helping them to relate their learning to the workplace environment.
Jason describes one activity in detail: “We have new students who come to us with little or no technical knowledge and no real picture of what their work will entail. So we came up with an idea of creating a video to illustrate every stage necessary to create the end product – in this case a live performance streamed in real time over the internet. We captured every step on video of students setting up, rehearsing, playing the gig, mixing, filming and packing everything away. The result was a six-hour video streamed live over the internet and recorded for later use as a teaching and learning resource for new and existing students.”

**The impact**

The impact of this project has been immediate. Retention is up across both music courses from 91% to 98%. Overall attainment has reached a pass rate of 95%, which compares to 91% last year and 87% the year before that. That represents an increase of two percentage points in Music Technology and a six point improvement in Music Performing/Composing. It is worth noting that the Music Performing/Composing course in isolation achieved 100% retention and attainment in the current academic year.

The project’s social networking sites also provide the additional benefit of improved student recruitment, engagement and attendance. Jason explains: “Brighton Records has now become one of the main marketing tools for our music courses to prospective students. As a result, we have seen enrolment double over the last 12 months. By handing over control to the students, we have also seen greater ownership and engagement, which in turn has improved attendance – thus dispelling the myth that online course delivery inevitably leads to greater absenteeism.”
For Andy Clowe, this project delivers on many fronts. “Jason’s deployment of social networking in the Music Department not only fulfils the academic requirements of the course, but it also clearly demonstrates to the students how they will be utilising social networking in a professional environment to make a living. Facebook and MySpace are being used effectively for peer reviews, quality control, evaluation and publicity. In addition to increasing engagement, these social networking sites also provide our students with much more ownership of their own learning, allowing them to use behind-the-scene pages to plan, organise, review and discuss their work.”

Enrolment on Jason’s courses have doubled in 12 months

The success of this project and the impact on teaching and learning has encouraged the College to develop the same online networking tools for its Journalism courses. Once fully rolled out, student journalists will publish local- and national-interest stories and will be working with Latest 7 magazine to edit and publish feeds. The best video and broadcast journalism reports will also be featured.

The lessons learned

For others contemplating utilising social networking to underpin the delivery of a course, Jason has this advice: “The technical issues of setting up a branded Facebook, MySpace or Twitter account are fairly straightforward. The biggest hurdle is getting the students to change their perceptions of social networking and realise that Facebook and the like can and are be used as work conduits. The nature of my curriculum area made that easier for me – with the music industry leading the way in using social networking professionally. Once my students realised that the Brighton Records social networking channels replicated industry practice and that using Facebook or MySpace professionally was how they were going to make their living, their content became much more serious and work orientated.”
Useful links

City College Brighton & Hove
Facebook
MySpace
SoundCloud
Bandcamp
Twitter
Brighton Records (CCB)

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