Dudley College – Going for Gold with Blackboard VLE Benchmarking

Summary
Staff at Dudley College have created a Blackboard VLE benchmarking system which encourages tutors to build up content and usage on their VLE courses. Since the introduction of the system, overall usage on the VLE has increased and the e-learning team has reported increased confidence levels in staff use of ILT on a wider teaching and learning basis.

About Dudley College
It is a large general further education college which is based on five sites. The college primarily attracts students from Dudley, Sandwell and the Black Country boroughs, as well as neighbouring cities and counties. The majority of the college’s 14,000 learners are adult learners.

Dudley College offers courses in all sector subject areas and provides education and training for apprentices, advanced apprentices, and Train to Gain learners. The most recent Ofsted inspection (April 2013) saw the college judged as ‘good.’

The challenge
Richard Gibbons, Learning Resources Supervisor requested access to the Blackboard VLE’s Advanced System Report module to get some in-depth statistics on how staff and students were using the VLE. He specifically wanted to query the type of content tools used in the course areas, however the reporting module does not report on that. There was also no consistent approach to accessing data.

The activity
Richard and the e-learning team devised a benchmarking system based on giving each course area 2 ratings – one for content and one for usage (by students).

The criteria and gradings are:

Content:
- Starter – no content, basic course structure only
- Bronze – basic content tools such as items, files and links to YouTube videos
- Silver – assessment tools, tests and surveys
- Gold – peer to peer assessment using wikis and blogs

The more use of the tools, the higher the content rating.

**Usage** is graded as follows:

- Starter – when students access the course once every 2-3 weeks
- Bronze – when students access the course once a week
- Silver – students generally access the course 2-3 times a week
- Gold – awarded to courses which students access every day.

Richard and his team carried out the first benchmarking process in 2011, by pulling data out of the Advanced System Report and evaluating each course. The data was entered into a spread sheet which runs queries to come up with the relevant content rating. This took around 40-50 hours of data entry. The result is a document (produced via mail merge) which contains the essential course information (ie name, ID, date created and last modified) as well as the tools used and course usage. The content average is worked out based on the totals for types of content, assessment and interactive tools.

It also includes a summary for the tutor as to what each rating means, how they can access an e-learning mentor, some next steps and how the tutor can encourage their students to use BlackBoard. Each course document is organised into curriculum area.

Richard says, “I then met with each curriculum centre manager to formulate an action plan – those plans are then passed onto the e-learning mentors. I highlight courses to showcase good practice and advise on those who would benefit from extra support to improve their course areas.

The whole process initially took 12 months to implement.

**The outcomes**

In December 2012, Richard and his team ran the benchmarking process again and compared data based on all the courses from the previous year with all of the courses from 2012.

Richard says, “When we studied the data in depth, it showed a significant improvement both on content and usage.”

This time, documentation was sent to the curriculum managers but no action plan was put in place by Richard and his team. Richard explains:

“It was decided to embed these into the course reviews. As a result, the course leaders now create the action plans themselves and this feeds into the quality systems, which has freed up more time for the e-learning team. It also means that there is more of an expectation on the tutors for the courses to perform.”

**The impact**

**OVERALL USAGE - 11-12 vs. 12-13**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GOLD</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILVER</td>
<td>167%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRONZE</td>
<td>198%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

www.jiscrc/casestudies
STARTER 86% Decrease

OVERALL CONTENT - 11-12 vs 12-13
GOLD 110% Increase
SILVER 8% Increase
BRONZE 9% Decrease
STARTER 36% Decrease

Richard says, “The benchmarking system has worked extremely well – it has given tutors a real incentive to encourage their students to use Blackboard, and use it themselves. The biggest success has been with the usage. The 86% decrease in the number of starter courses is fantastic and really reflects how tutors have embraced this.”

He adds, “Since the benchmarking has become a focus of the course reviews, I am hoping to see a further shift in terms of usage and content. We still have some underperforming courses and at the moment we are working more closely with those course tutors however once we see more of a shift away from those courses, we want to harness the gold courses and help them to continually improve. This will include looking at things like Blackboard mobile – we could even consider a ‘platinum’ rating.”

Staff and students have been more positive about Blackboard since the benchmarking system was implemented.

Student feedback about Blackboard:

- “I love the fact that tutors put lessons on blackboard and I can access them easily.” – Student on an Access to Healthcare Science Course
- “Blackboard is a really good way of keeping track of my studies” – Student on a Travel and Tourism Course
- “Blackboard is an easy way to find assessments & other work provided by my tutor” – Student on a Beauty Course

Some staff members have been so enthusiastic and willing to improve their Blackboard courses that it has had an impact on their overall use of ILT in the classroom:

“I would just like to say thank you for the support you have given using Blackboard. I am using Blackboard regularly now and find it really useful. Just to let you know that I received a Grade 1 for my teaching observation. The observer was especially impressed with the use of my IT.”

Richard says, “It has changed the way that some tutors teach and encouraged them to be more interactive. The e-learning mentors have worked with many staff members over several months to help them improve their confidence with ILT. The results speak for themselves in lesson observations."

Richard and his team now plan to incorporate video conferencing into Blackboard and work more closely with skills assessors, to encourage them to contact students remotely.

The lessons learned
Richard says, “The whole process really opened our eyes and surprised us, as the
VLE wasn’t as well used as we originally thought. It also made us think that there are probably many other learning providers out there who don’t necessarily know how their VLE is being used so I would highly recommend adopting and implementing a similar system.”

He adds, “It’s not perfect and there is still work to be done, but at least we are doing something and we now have a clear picture across the college of exactly how the VLE is being used. The benchmarking system has given us a clear direction to move towards.”

**Useful links**

- [Dudley College website](#)
- [Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment](#)

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