City of Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College: Using MS SharePoint to Facilitate and Streamline Lesson Observations

Summary

By using Microsoft SharePoint 2010, staff at City of Stoke on Trent College have benefitted from a more streamlined approach to lesson observations which has resulted in time saved on preparation, an increase in the number of observations per year and more consistency in the moderation process. Ultimately, it is anticipated that this will lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

About City of Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College

It has approximately 1,800 students mostly aged between 16-18 and has provision in subjects ranging from World Development to Graphic Design. In 2010, the college benefitted from a new building which includes a three-storey learning resource centre, learning pods and a cashless system for catering and travel.

Most students study on advanced level courses, with over a third following a combined course of GCE and vocational qualifications.

Image 1: City of Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College

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The challenge

The senior management team wanted to increase the number of lesson observations carried out per academic year from one to three per member of staff to ultimately improve the quality of teaching and learning. Previously, the college’s Quality Officer used a spreadsheet to track observations which was unwieldy and difficult to manage.

College Principal Paul Mangnall says, “We wanted to manage the process more effectively, disseminate good practice and improve the consistency of moderation and the lesson observation process. However, we didn’t want the administrative system to get in the way of achieving these objectives - the spreadsheet just couldn’t have handled it.”

The activity

The College had already reaped the benefits of Microsoft SharePoint by using it for the self-assessment process, and in management meetings where communication has improved as staff are able to track actions more efficiently, and make decisions in a more timely way. As a result, this led to a 15% improvement in achievement at BTEC Level 3 in the last academic year. This was due to staff being able to monitor a previous problem more effectively using SharePoint.

Paul says, “Due to the success of using SharePoint for other business processes, it made sense to make use of the existing system for recording, tracking and monitoring lesson observations. Also, we wanted to set our own sequence of processes which a bespoke solution would not have allowed us to do. SharePoint represented an accessible, value for money solution which we could join up to the SARS, management group meetings and performance management data.”

The first task was to map out the business process by defining all the steps involved in the lesson observation and making sure that they tied in with the agreed protocols – for example who initiates the observation, who allocates the observer, and making sure that all the relevant documents were in the right place. The college involved the Quality Officer, who worked directly with the previous system and tested the new process along with the observation team, and IT Project Officer Carl Taylor who mapped the workflow into SharePoint.

Carl says, “We ran some trial sessions which allowed us to pick up on some workflow errors, for example, the workflow didn’t trigger quickly enough and
so a member of staff could see the moderation comments before they had received feedback on their observation.”

It also highlighted the need to be selective when training the staff.

Carl says, “We trained the observers of which there are 25. We also trained the core team of SMT and the middle managers, as we wanted to encourage them to observe as its spreads good practice. The decision was taken not to train each individual member of staff en-masse as they would only need to access the system a couple of times per year and as we didn’t want them to forget what they had learnt, we trained them just prior to their observation.”

**The outcomes**

The college now has a much more streamlined and effective process which makes use of some of SharePoint 2010’s key features. The process is as follows:

- Quality Officer creates a new lesson observation document set and sets the required attributes e.g. the name of the observee, course and class. The document set contains all the necessary templates (including a lesson plan and standard lesson observation template)
- An automatic e-mail goes to the observer to say that they have been allocated an observation.
- The observer sets the class and course fields – the business connectivity features of SharePoint recalls this information from the student records database
- An e-mail is sent to the observer and observee confirming details of the observation
- Assessment vs target reports are generated daily for each class to show how the students are performing against the target grade. SharePoint accesses this library of documents and copies the class reports into the lesson observations
- The observation takes place. Lesson plans and associated documentation can be uploaded by the observee. The observer can make and moderate comments on the observation without the observee seeing them at this stage. The grade is allocated and the observation is marked as ‘ready for moderation’
- If the observee has been awarded a grade 1, 2 or 3, an e-mail goes to the Quality Officer and Paul’s team of senior observers to notify them that an observation is ready for modification and someone from the moderation team needs to be allocated.
- If the observee has been awarded a grade 4, the same people will receive an e-mail but only Paul or a fellow senior colleague will complete the moderation.
- When the moderator has been assigned they receive an e-mail. Once the moderator has made their comments and agreed the grade, they will mark the observation as complete and the observer will receive an email. The observer can then make the observation
comments available to the observee when complete and feedback is given.

Carl says, “SharePoint has significantly improved the consistency and quality of the observation process. Previously, the observations weren’t being shared. With the old system, someone moderated and then gave the feedback without it being checked. Now, as there are only 3-4 allocated moderators, they can all see each other’s comments and as the process is driven by workflow, the observers can’t give feedback until moderation has occurred.

![Image 3: Formal Lesson Observation document](image)

**The impact**

Although the College has only used SharePoint for lesson observations during the last academic year (2011-12), there has already been a significant impact on staff and the organisation as a whole:

- **Cost savings** – the college used an existing system and therefore saved money
- **Time savings for teachers** who were previously spending up to 5 hours preparing for a 45 minute lesson observation, including time wasted searching for the correct documentation. Teachers are now able to focus more on delivering the lesson without the burden of administrative paperwork - the responsibility for which is now with the observer and the appropriate documentation is available in one place

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• **Time savings for the observation team** – SharePoint has significantly speeded up the administrative process

• **More timely feedback** – observees are no longer chasing up their lesson observations 6 months after they have taken place.

• **Increased number of observations** – from 120 per academic year to 360

• **Dissemination of good practice** – when looking through the moderation comments, SMT discovered a lack of equality and diversity embedded into the lessons which is a key driver for Ofsted. This has since been addressed and incorporated into staff development

• **More consistent approach to moderation** – the system prevents any inconsistencies. All observees benefit from the same process in the same systematic way.

• **Full audit trail** of the lesson observation process with built in version control – vital for Ofsted inspections

• **Information is more accessible** – at the touch of a button, senior management can view all of the Grade 1 observations without having to trawl through paperwork

Paul says, “For the first time ever, every member of staff has had two formal observations in the academic year. Without SharePoint, we just couldn’t have got through the volume of observations.”

He adds, “We noticed a difference between the first and second observations – there has been a change in the profile of observations which we believe could be down to better consistency in the moderations.”

“It is still relatively early days but already we have seen a huge impact. Ultimately, we hope to see a significant impact on the quality of the teaching and learning. The system was set up since our last Ofsted inspection and there are certainly some aspects that have been developed with Ofsted In mind.”

**The lessons learned**

Carl Taylor, ICT Project Officer says, ”You have to spec out the workflow and define what you are using it for so for example in our case, we had to define what a lesson observation is and go through each step of the process. Then, you can decide what items and properties you need to assign against the workflow and apply business logic to it.”

He adds, “Staff training is a major consideration and you need to think about how many times per year that staff will use the system. We found that it was better to do the training at the point of need rather than running the risk of staff being trained on how to use it, and then forgetting it 6 months later.”

Further plans include the addition of more peer observation documents to SharePoint, off-site access for all staff, and further development to the reporting aspects of the system.
Useful links

City of Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College
Microsoft SharePoint 2010

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