City College Brighton and Hove: Moodle Course Ladder

Summary

The case study examines how City College Brighton and Hove have successfully used their Moodle Course Ladder in conjunction with User Level competencies to embed Moodle use across the curriculum and train staff in the use of Moodle. In addition 88% of students agree that it helped their learning in the latest all college student survey (a 68% rise in 4 years). Following the college inspection in June 2011, Ofsted commented that “Teachers and learners make very good use of the college’s excellent VLE. The VLE and its expanding range of e-learning resources are used extensively across all subject areas” (Inspection Report June ’11).

About City College Brighton

City College is the largest post-16 learning provider in Brighton & Hove providing 1,000 courses and qualifications to more than 10,000 full and part-time students. They have 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.

The challenge

In 2007 the college undertook a detailed internal review of e-learning practice, policies and systems, and an investigation into the opportunities that e-learning could potentially provide. One of the key recommendations was that the college VLE should be central to the college e-learning strategy because potentially it could:

- Impact upon the overall quality of teaching and learning through improved differentiation in resources, enhanced extension activities, knowledge checking and feedback, providing higher quality learning materials.
- Lead to significant time and efficiency savings in curriculum delivery.
- Provide students with greater ownership of and engagement with their learning.
- Facilitate greater good practice, resource and knowledge sharing across the curriculum.
- Act as a driver for further e-learning integration in curriculum delivery.
At that time the college was facing issues common to many educational institutions, in that there was a college VLE (Moodle) but it was not widely used and was being of little if any real benefit to the majority of staff and students. It was felt that in order to resolve this situation and enable the VLE to reach its potential some of the key issues that needed addressing were around:

- Culture and perception of the VLE
- Ability of staff to use the VLE
- Ensuring VLE course pages met the needs of learners.
- Ensuring VLE use became a standard part of curriculum delivery

The activity

What they did

In order to address those key issues the concept of the ‘Moodle Ladder’ framework was devised by the Senior Manager responsible for e-learning (James Mettyear) and the then e-learning manager (Andy Clowe). The Ladder framework provided a 5 ‘rung’ mechanism for assuring course page quality, supported by a training plan for staff where they could achieve Basic, Intermediate or Advanced user level.

Course pages could progress through the Rung levels as they developed and staff became more skilled in VLE use. The Rungs were set up to reflect two stages of maturity in VLE use

Rungs 1 and 2 checked compliance with a set of defined standards for a VLE course page. Rungs 3, 4 and 5 aimed to reflect the impact a more mature course page was having on learning.

Clear, unequivocal minimum expectations were provided to all curriculum departments in terms of the Rung level each VLE course page and the ‘user level’ all curriculum staff had to achieve. The expectations applied to all, so in Year 1 every course page had to reach a minimum of Rung 1 and each staff member had to achieve Basic User status. Every year the minimum expectations were then raised, ensuring that departments and individuals were supported as required.

How they did it

In order for the development framework to succeed it was essential to:

- Have Senior Management drive and visible support for the project.
- Provide clear targets and expectations that are embedded into other quality assurance processes such as the departmental SAR and staff Appraisal process.
- Ensure staff had access to the training and support they need.
- Link it to broader strategic objectives and in some cases make it a central component of them.
- Embed it into the organisational culture.
- Share internal VLE success stories and ‘real world’ benefits.
In terms of practicalities:

- Checking course pages for achievement of Rungs 1 and 2 was done on a rolling basis by the e-learning department.
- Any course at Rung 2 could be self-assessed by a lecturer or team leader for achievement of Rungs 3 to 5 using the rung assessment guide.
- Some of the criteria used by staff when assessing for Rung 3 and above included feedback from students, page and resource utilisation statistics and appropriateness of resources, activities and layout.
- Self-assessments were sent to the e-learning team who undertake a validation check with the Team Leader to clarify any issues that arise.
- It was possible for courses to go both up and down the ladder.
- All staff were given their own page to practice in and demonstrate their ability to use the VLE.
- Staff demonstrated a set of pre-defined criteria on their practice page to achieve Basic, Intermediate or Advanced user status. This was checked by the e-learning team upon request.
- Online reports provided on course rung status and staff user levels.
- Significant amounts of classroom based training were provided, supported by online courses and help guides.
- After year 1 a more pragmatic approach as to whether a VLE page was needed for specific courses was taken.

The outcomes

The implementation of the Moodle Course Ladder framework has not only been successful in turning VLE use into a standard part of curriculum delivery, it has also been one of the key foundations upon which e-learning has developed. By providing the curriculum with clear expectations and targets for Moodle utilisation, along with the support and training to acquire the necessary skills, it ensured e-learning was central in course planning and delivery.

The framework has enabled the college to continually increase the impact that the VLE has on teaching and learning and ensure that staff develop and maintain their skill set. Time and efficiency savings have been made across the curriculum, the learning environment, tools and resources for students have improved and greater collaboration and resource sharing between staff facilitated.

With Moodle utilisation established in the college culture it ingrained the concept of e-learning on a much broader basis. With Moodle as the foundation, staff have explored how to provide more effective resources via the VLE and how to use technologies such as Social Networking instead of or in conjunction with Moodle (where appropriate).

The impact of Moodle on Teaching and Learning helped highlight to senior management the benefits that could be afforded via e-learning generally. This has resulted in significant support for the e-learning agenda both in policy and investment, enabling the college to better meet the needs of students and the challenges facing the sector.
The impact

- **97%** of students (where question was applicable) agreed that their lecturers encouraged them to use Moodle, (whole college survey May 2012)
- **86%** of full time learners (where question was applicable) stated that Moodle helps their learning (whole college survey May 2012)
- **91%** of part time learners (where question was applicable) stated that Moodle helps their learning (whole college survey May 2012)
- **276** current staff members have attained at least Basic User level, this includes **100%** of full time and part time contracted teaching staff and all but 18 currently active sessional lecturers (August 2012)
- **30%** of contracted teaching staff (full and part time) reached Moodle Intermediate User level (August 2012)
- **80** course pages have reached Rung 3 or above, all other active course pages (over 250) have reached Rung 2 (August 2012)
- Average of **33,000** overall logins and **4,200** unique logins a month

Amongst a number of positive VLE related comments from Ofsted in our last college inspection (June ’11) it was stated that:

“Teachers and learners make very good use of the college’s excellent VLE. The VLE and its expanding range of e-learning resources are used extensively across all subject areas”

“Learners have easy access to an excellent VLE which they use extensively to support their learning”.

Ofsted were to keen to highlight their VLE good practice and expressed a desire to use it as an exemplar of national good practice.

College achievement rates are now amongst the best in the country and appropriate utilisation of the VLE has been an important part of that success. The confidence staff have gained through using the VLE has facilitated the broader adoption and utilisation of e-learning resources / systems, impacting on teaching and learning across the college.

The lessons learned

Setting up a VLE is relatively straightforward, the difficulty lies in ensuring it is not only utilised for curriculum delivery but ensuring that this is done effectively and en masse.

The Moodle Course Ladder provides a framework within which expectations can be established, training and support provided, performance monitored and impact measured. However, experiences showed them that the framework can only be successful if:

- The reasons why VLE use can benefit both teaching and learning are explained clearly.
- A culture of expectation around e-learning and VLE use is established and developed year on year.
- It is seen to be driven from the top
• Usage is embedded across the whole curriculum (where appropriate).
• Processes such as Self Assessment Reviews, Appraisals and Observations scheme take into account VLE expectations and usage.
• Staff receive significant amounts of training, support and guidance.
• Organisational stories of the impact and benefits of VLE usage are shared.

There will be resistance (sometimes significant) to using the VLE, primarily during the first year of implementing the framework. This can be for a variety of reasons including:

• Fear of the technology
• Fear of change more generally
• Lack of knowledge of how VLE use can benefit particular courses or subjects
• Concerns around increased workload.
• Belief that students would not engage with it.

It’s important that staff concerns and issues are taken seriously and not dismissed as people being difficult, more often than not they are asking legitimate questions or raising valid points for clarification.

Useful links

City College Brighton & Hove.

Links to related case studies

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