Liverpool Community College: The benefits of a college-wide review focusing on ILT and e-learning

Summary

As with many Colleges, ILT strategy and developments at Liverpool Community College are a priority. The College has recently undertaken an e-Progress Review (ePR) through the Jisc Regional Support Centre (RSC) Northwest, a free service offered to colleges to help them understand and develop their level of ‘e-Maturity’; it has used the evidence and results from this process as the basis for its ILT strategy and developments. Through the positive experience of Liverpool Community College, this case study highlights the benefits of a college-wide review focusing on ILT and e-learning.

About Liverpool Community College

Liverpool Community College offers a wide range of further education and higher education courses, from Pre-entry and Entry level through to higher national certificates and diplomas, foundation degrees and degree programmes.

The College has been awarded Beacon Status, and both the previous and recent (February 2009) Ofsted inspections have pronounced the College as ‘outstanding’. There are six main centres and a number of drop-in centres across the city of Liverpool.

The challenge

The challenge at Liverpool Community College was similar to that faced by many other colleges; whilst there were ‘pockets’ of excellence across the College in development and use of ILT, there were other areas which had not made any significant progress. The College was aware of this imbalance through internal quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, but it was also confirmed at the previous inspection on which, whilst grading the College as ‘outstanding’ overall, highlighted ILT as an area requiring further development.

Mick Smith, Manager for Professional Development and Teacher Education at the College, was asked to take responsibility for ILT strategy and developments. He recognised that, not only did he need to get an understanding of the progress and
level of e-maturity in his new role, but that this was also necessary in order for the College to develop an appropriate ILT strategy and define objectives inline with this. He observed that, at that point, ILT appeared to 'fall between' the College's learning and teaching strategy and IT strategy, referenced in both but not fully represented in either.

With a watchful eye on the future, Mick was also aware that the College was planning a new £30m development in central Liverpool in 2010; ILT would form an important and integral part of this development, requiring that the College had a level of e-maturity which would enable it to maximise ILT in this development.

**The activity**

Mick had no concerns about suggesting to senior management that a review of their position would be better coming via a neutral, external source; the College has an ethos of not only striving to develop and improve, but in being open to who might assist and support them in doing so. Not only did he feel that the RSC ePR was an appropriate process but that, as his relationship with Jisc RSC Northwest had been both "positive and professional", he had confidence that it would be the right step to take. ePR is a free Jisc RSC service offered to colleges to help them understand and develop their level of e-maturity. It involves key staff in the college responding to a series of questions, with the Jisc RSC conducting the analysis of the responses and assisting the college with their interpretation.

Prior to the review taking place, discussions with those staff involved typically prompted them to ask Mick what they would get out of the process and how it would help them. His response was that it would be crucial in informing a strategic document to help move them forward with a whole-college approach to ILT and e-learning which, importantly, would have been based on, and would have taken into account, opinions and perspectives from all relevant areas. The importance and relevance of the review was underlined by the commitment of the Principal and Vice Principal at the College, through confirmation of their support in writing at the beginning of the whole process and their attendance at feedback and discussion meetings following the review.

Advised by Jisc RSC Northwest, Mick ensured that in all communications with relevant staff prior to the review, as well as giving them an understanding of why they were taking part, he stressed that:

- the review was owned by them collectively;
- it would remain confidential to the College;
- their genuine opinions and perspectives about where the College was at were essential;
- Jisc RSC Northwest were not there as inspectors, but to "help us to see where we are"; and
• the College would use the results of the review as they thought relevant and appropriate.

The outcomes

The responses of all the staff involved in the review were translated into a review document, and Mick asked the staff to formally accept this document on behalf of the College. He felt this was important if they were to use the information in it to assist them in moving forward and says that, because they accepted the document as a valid overview, it has given him strength to be able to say to others "this is something we identified and it's something we need to move on."

Whilst much of what was in the review document confirmed what they already thought they knew about their position, Mick says it feels more relevant for the staff knowing that this was the view of a representative group from across the College and is convinced that it has created more collective ownership of the agenda for change.

In addition, the ILT strategy that has now been rewritten since the review and its resulting discussion and feedback, cross references the review document throughout. Mick says this has galvanised them collectively to achieve their goals, and diminished the risk of them feeling like it is one person's view being imposed. Situations where strategy documents are written by one person without consultation with other staff on whom it will impact, thus lacking a sense of ownership for anyone other than the author, is not uncommon.

Mick readily acknowledges that he has his own agendas, especially in relation to learners and learning and teaching, but he feels that the involvement of RSC Northwest neutralised agendas that he or others might have had from the process. Whilst it would still have been possible to gain an understanding of their progress and level of eMaturity without the involvement of RSC Northwest, he says that it would have been far more complex, acknowledging that he probably couldn't have focused staff in the same way on his own, or have gathered the information and evidence as effectively.

As a result, Mick is definite that the ePR has provided the information they needed as a college to be able to develop their newly written ILT Strategy and to make informed decisions from that about developments; he also says that the ILT strategy has more 'credibility' through its cross references to the review document.

The impact

Whilst Mick recognises that the 'litmus test' for the College now is in how the action plan which has been developed from the ILT strategy progresses, he is confident that the ePR has given more weight to moving their ILT strategy and developments forwards. Informal feedback at the very recent Ofsted Inspection highlighted aspects of ILT in terms of good practice, whereas previously it had been generally identified as a weakness.

His view is that ePR can be a positive step for colleges that:
• have a culture of wanting to improve;

• are open to constructive criticism; and

• have senior management that genuinely support the process.

So what advice would he offer other colleges who might consider going through a similar e-maturity review process? If they want to develop and change, will involve the relevant staff and are prepared to be open and honest, he would "recommend the process one hundred per cent"; he would be keen to use the process again in the future.

Mick sees a significant additional benefit to the College from the ePR, in that it has strengthened the links that they have with RSC Northwest. Now, he says, there is an even greater level of trust between them, and there is "more understanding of what the RSC does, especially with the senior managers in the College, and it gives the RSC a much better handle on the College."

He is sure that this increased level of understanding will help the College plan for future developments, particularly in relation to the 2010 new build developments; to this end he has included the identification of areas where RSC Northwest can advise and support the College further in their ILT strategy action plan.

Useful links

Jisc RSC Northwest
Liverpool Community College

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