Blackburn College: DIY! College departments catalogue their own technologies on Library Management System for loan

Summary

Blackburn College is making use of its Heritage Library Management System (LMS) for a wide variety of loans beyond that of books; this has enabled them to better manage the growing numbers and types of technologies that are being used in teaching and learning.

In an additional pilot development, they have taken the bold step of training college departments in cataloguing their own technologies to add to the LMS for loan. This has enabled the departments to keep track of their own equipment easily, and provided a more consistent approach to equipment loan within the College.

About Blackburn College

Blackburn College is a large College of Further and Higher Education providing education and training in Blackburn, East Lancashire. It serves over 20,000 students of all ages, backgrounds, abilities and interests.

The main campus has a Sixth Form Centre offering a wide range of courses and a University Centre providing a wide range of degree, HND and professional qualifications. Some courses are located away from the main campus at community centres or at the College’s Management Centre, including many free courses in basic IT, numeracy and literacy skills.

The College also provides vocational further education courses that include work-based, day-release and short training courses for employers to develop the skills and potential of their staff. Some courses are designed specific to employer objectives. Blackburn College has recently been awarded National Beacon College status.

The challenge

Cheryl Dunne, Team Leader for the School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Blackburn College, asked library staff if the school could utilise the Heritage LMS
to manage the range of equipment that it purchased and loaned. At that time, the college was using the LMS in a relatively traditional way for library resources.

However, the request prompted Philip Abbott (HE Librarian) and Jane Cooke (E-learning Manager) to explore how they could make better use of the LMS, linking with plans that Jane had to make more technology available centrally for loan to students to support their learning.

Whilst the obvious solution would have been for the central library team to take responsibility for cataloguing and loan of the departmental equipment, Philip and Jane set out to find a solution which would allow the departments to keep full control of the loans, including continuing to keep the equipment located within their departments.

The activity

The Art & Design and Photography Departments within the School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, along with the college’s Disability Services, were already loaning out equipment using their own methods and process. The loan procedures differed from department to department, and typically were long-winded and problematic to manage, such as using handwritten, carbon-copied loan forms in the Photography Department.

Together, Philip and Jane made decisions about the options that would be available as standard on the LMS for equipment loans to avoid the addition of too many resource types and circulation rules, thus ensuring that the system could be managed successfully by the departments, and function effectively for them. This included the following.

- Preventing requests or reservations for catalogued equipment, while retaining these options for library book loans.
- Allowing departments to type in date options if required (as well as selecting from standard overnight/7 day/28 day options). This, for example, allows Disability Services to allocate a piece of essential equipment for daily use to a student for a full year.
- Ensuring that serial numbers can be added to an accession record to identify individual items of equipment where departments have purchased multiple items of the same make/model (something that does not need consideration with multiple copies of books).
- Ensuring that the cost of equipment can be recorded on the catalogue record, to identify replacement costs should a case of non-return of equipment result in small claims procedures.
- Ensuring ease of identification by classifying each item by its location, eg Photography Tech Store.
Although departments were to be given the ability to manage the cataloguing and loaning of their equipment, a decision was taken for central library services to control the processes which underpinned the loans, as with library book loans. This included library responsibility for:

- reader records, to ensure students were included on the LMS and, therefore, able to loan equipment;
- overdue letters linking to the payment of loan-related fines, which also ensured that students with fines of over £1.00 were not able to loan any further items (whether equipment or books) until the fine was cleared; and
- managing the small claims procedure, in liaison with the Finance Department, where invoices are issued for non-returned items.

Having worked through solutions for the cataloguing process and the management of the loans, the LMS was loaded onto a PC located where participating departments stored their equipment. Each department purchased a barcode scanner (at a cost of approximately £100 each) required to identify students, locate their records, and make issue and return transactions. Barcode labels, which enable the departments to identify each piece of equipment, are provided by the library at a nominal cost.

In an effort to make training on use of the LMS system as simple as possible, Philip simply sat with the relevant departmental staff for a couple of hours and took them through the processes, rather than providing formal training. In that time he was able to give them an understanding of the principles of cataloguing and train them in how to use the LMS.

![Catalogue record showing main details for item of photographic equipment](image_url)
Department staff know that they can contact Philip at any time with questions and feedback about the system. Further development to the system has already been made based on questions from departments on how they could easily identify which items of their equipment were out on loan at any point in time. As a result, a reporting feature has been added enabling each department to generate a list highlighting which of their items are out on loan and which have gone to small claims.
The outcomes

Although only in use as a pilot since the start of the academic year, the system is working well for the three departments using it, making the loans process both simple and effective for them.

As might be expected in setting up new processes and systems, and introducing staff to them, there have been a few issues along the way – for example:

- staff have had to find alternative ways of identifying small or odd-shaped items of equipment, such as adding the barcode to a tag which is then attached to the equipment; and

- staff adding items to the LMS system but not saving them (due to initial unfamiliarity with the system), resulting in having to go back and add them a second time.

The use of the LMS for departmental equipment loans coincided neatly with Jane's plans to purchase other equipment for use by their HE students in various aspects for their learning; as a result, laptops and netbooks, digital notepads, digital recorders, and even memory sticks with AccessApps software/applications are now available for loan within the College's new University Centre Library.
The impact

The impact of the development for the departments using it is significant. In the School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Kevin Howlett (Photography Technology Store) (pictured right, with a barcoded item of equipment) and Catherine Sutcliffe (Art & Design Store) say that the new system is invaluable, and neither would want to revert back to their respective previous methods of loaning equipment.

Both also think that the recent reporting development has made it far easier to keep track of which items are out on loan.

Philip is convinced that the new system, particularly with its link to the central Library loans processes, has influenced students into taking better care of the equipment they loan. He says that the students seem to understand better the terms of loan (aligned with that of loaning books), whereas previously they were more likely to have been ignorant of the terms, or not particularly bothered about them.

By way of example, it is significant that no equipment has gone missing in the Art & Design department since the system was introduced, something which occasionally did used to happen.

Taking time to plan the equipment loans before its introduction has been key to its success, and for anyone setting up a similar system, Philip advises: “It doesn't have to be a big deal, don't set up new circulation rules or loan periods if you can help it. Just keep it simple.”

And this advice is confirmed by the solution that has been implemented, providing the college with a system that:

- is easy for departmental staff to understand and learn;
- is easy for the departments to administer and manage;
- is low cost for the departments to adopt;
- links into existing college processes; and
- aligns with existing library loan procedures.

Useful links

Jisc RSC Northwest

Blackburn College

Heritage Library Management System
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