South Essex College: Learner voice – a 360 degree approach

Summary

South Essex College has developed a college intranet called C_Space, which has grown from a handful of HTML pages to an intranet hosting 70 in-house developed applications and 2 million staff and student generated pages. In the past three years the college has developed a range of social networking tools within the site to engage students. This has provided a 360-degree appraisal system for the college, which has informed the content and design of the intranet as well as influencing the overall development of the college.

About South Essex College

South Essex College of Further and Higher Education has three main Campuses in Basildon, Southend and Thurrock offering courses for all age groups starting from 14 years. It offers Higher Education courses in association with Essex University. Many part-time courses are offered for personal and professional development. Apprenticeships and training for professionals from business organisations is also provided.

The challenge

South Essex College implemented a basic intranet system 10 years ago with the central aim of supporting teaching and learning.

However, in the past three years, the system has changed and developed rapidly due to demand from students who have become interested in social networking and learning via web technologies.

The intranet was a very passive online environment for staff and students. Previously it was a place for the college community to access static HTML pages, word documents and PDF files. The ILT team hoped that with a range of social networking tools it would become an environment where staff and students could engage with each other.
Ian Franklin, Head of ILT and Learning Resources, explained: “Before we had this change in the online environment the student voice wasn’t really heard.”

Although the college started its first forum back in 2003, they were heavily monitored and controlled. In 2007, Ian decided it was time to completely open the forums.

“We wanted to open them to everyone, so all could share their views about college issues and we could gather student feedback. Because of this online engagement with students, we wanted to take their experience further, and reflect what they were doing using web-based services outside of college.”

As a result, the ILT team listened to student feedback and tried to reproduce the online environment they enjoyed using in their leisure time. They hoped to use some of the features of popular social networking sites.

**The activity**

In October 2009 the College’s intranet, seeNet was upgraded to C_Space with the main aim of opening up as many channels as possible to engage and gather feedback from students and to increase the learner voice.

Ian explained: “We were quite protective about the forums before we opened them up. We still monitor them, but students are well behaved and moderate themselves.”

*C_Space now represents a PLE (Personalised Learning Environment). With one personalised log in.*
The ILT team sent out polls, surveys and forum questions asking for student feedback on what kinds of content they would like to see, and how they would like the pages to look. This two-way exchange of information then became one of the main ways in which the team could plan improvements to the site.

Ian said: “The intranet has been developed as a result of requests from students and tutors. We asked them through the forums and had a specific representation from the student council for a Twitter-type application. It’s been an evolutionary process.”

C_Space now represents a PLE (Personalised Learning Environment). With one personalised log in for the whole network each student can access their own page, which includes:

- A blog application
- Twitter-type tool called Seek, which gives status updates
- A notes creator
- Personalised URL library
- List of linked learning resources.

One of the key new sections of C_Space is C_Live which has been designed specifically with the students’ social experience in mind. Within the contemporary design of the page, which was actually designed by a games development student, there is a personal blog, a Seek feed, a notes editor, and a library for hyperlinks. With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, student council members have started to publish content onto this new site.
C_Live which has been designed specifically with the students’ social experience in mind

“C_Live was developed for students to really engage with each other. This is an area we are still working on,” Ian added.

The new applications and pages have been promoted by word of mouth during staff and student inductions. The ILT team’s services are also promoted on the external website, ICThorizons.

Ian said: “We have received great support from the Senior Management Team. They have recognised the importance of the college’s online environment in enabling feedback from students.”

The outcomes

“It’s for students to engage, and the learner voice has really taken off. It’s not just a passive online environment anymore.”

Students have benefitted greatly from this engagement, as through polls, forums, surveys, blogs and Twitter-type tools their voice is being heard by other students, staff and senior management.

Subjects on the forums vary greatly with topics ranging from favourite EastEnders episodes to debates on political issues. On a more practical level students can send in complaints regarding IT problems.

Ian commented: “What we are finding upstairs in IT User Services is that staff are responding really quickly to students’ technical problems. Students are very happy about that.”
The intranet is there first and foremost to support teaching and learning. Tutors can use C_Space to keep up to date course plans, so students can go to their personalised online page and review what they will be doing throughout the year.

The value of this function was discovered through an online survey. “We asked students whether they thought having an accurate online course plan was beneficial to their studies and 80% said yes.”

The social networking tools are also there to help teaching and learning. Seek, the Twitter-type application, helped one student find out how he could convert an image after other students responded to his status update with ideas.

The blog application is being used in the classroom, after a request from a tutor running professional cookery courses for 75 students. Work on the blogs is assessed, and students can comment and peer review as well as receive feedback from the tutor in an open environment.

The intranet has developed into a 360-degree appraisal system for the college. Students feel engaged as they are asked to give their views, and this feedback benefits the college and informs improvements. Student feedback has even influenced college policy, after a ‘no hats’ security policy was changed last year.

The whole college, and the wider South Essex community, is now aware of the high level of student engagement. The ILT team constantly receives requests from staff to run surveys in order to get student feedback.

Ian said: “We have just run a survey on student inductions, and it’s not a survey students have to complete. To get 872 responses in the first week is fantastic.”

The team was also recently asked by Southend Borough Council to run a poll concerning student travel arrangements as they wanted to gather feedback on the college’s green travel policies.

**The impact**

The college has now indexed 3 million pages on the intranet, and in the last year alone 30,000 messages were posted through forums, polls and surveys.

In the student council area of the main forum there are 420 topics with 10,000 comments since last year. Poll of the week has grown in popularity, and has more than 140 topics in the forums, attracting 2,000 responses each week.

Ian said: “The online tools and increased learner voice are making an impact on the whole college as tutors and senior management can keep abreast of
what is going on and what is wanted by reading students’ comments. It’s keeping us on our toes.”

Students have given their feedback on the upgraded C_Space.

“The new design for C_Space looks great.”

“It’s really helpful. I really enjoy the questions that are thrown at us every week through the polls.”

“The calendar feature showing us when our deadlines are coming up is a great help.”

The college believes that the success of the site is down to ‘keeping it simple’.

“We don’t get sidetracked by any sexy uses of technology. We are more interested in getting the basics right and supporting teaching and learning as widely as possible.”

To increase the learner voice, Ian believes colleges must maintain openness. “Heighten the levels of student engagement by keeping the intranet as open as possible. Rather than let a VLE be a passive environment, students can be interactive on a day to day basis. Our students have one log in to the network and can access everything.”

The team now hopes to fully integrate Web 2.0 technologies by giving students netbooks and cameras so they can use the in-built CMS to upload content onto C_Live and the new college sports site.
Alongside the development of C_Live, the college is also planning to develop mobile apps so students can check assessment deadlines and timetables through mobile phones.

However, one of the main priorities for the team is to develop a whole new area to showcase students’ work.

Ian said: “We want to do a lot more to promote students’ curricular efforts. There is some brilliant work which we will publish. We believe this will inspire students at the college and also encourage those looking to join in the future.”

**Useful links**


[http://www.southessex.ac.uk/](http://www.southessex.ac.uk/)

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