Chelmsford College - Learning and teaching: a holistic approach

Summary

Chelmsford College has created an observation, appraisal and continuing professional development (CPD) cycle by successfully integrating a collection of bespoke web-based systems together within their intranet. Students have benefitted from improved teaching and learning because of the rapid, transparent and thorough cycle of staff being observed, appraised and given appropriate CPD. The college has also saved time and money by being able to use single source data to schedule observations, appraisals and CPD to individuals’ needs.

About Chelmsford College

Chelmsford College provides a wide range of academic, professional and vocational disciplines to young adults and mature students. Courses include entry level to HNC/D in construction, engineering, art and design, humanities, health and child care, sports and leisure, travel and tourism, computing, business, administration, science and public services. More than 2,300 of the students at the college are young people between the ages of 16 and 19, attending courses at three sites around Chelmsford town centre.

The challenge

“The teaching observation cycle before was a paper-based system, and scheduling was carried out on a large sheet of paper a bit like an old school timetable. It would often take a long time for information to get back to the quality and learning team, and the data could be difficult to analyse. It made tracking observations a challenging and very time consuming process.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development
The observation reports did not integrate automatically with the records on other systems, such as timetabling or CPD, and as a result, there was a lot of rekeying to enter information into different system areas such as CPD.

“It was a very labour intensive process, and staff had to spend much more time capturing and then reporting data. This could have fed in automatically from other sources if it had been integrated.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

Even after the observation system was centralised, it was still very paper-based. The administration team would have to rekey all the information to enable them to produce different reports.

“The reporting wouldn’t allow us to cut the data in ways which would help us analyse different areas, for example, it was a manual process trying to produce reports by sector subject area. Equality and diversity data was another area which was difficult to report on before we integrated the external systems such as the register and student records.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

The observation team had to also rely on a separate email from human resources notifying them of new starters or leavers.

“An issue which arose was that it was possible for a teacher to start with us on a temporary basis, maybe covering a couple of hours a week over a very short time period. If that teacher’s length of stay then increased and their teaching load went up it was very difficult for the quality team, being separate from HR, to identify this in a timely manner. This could result in these staff not being scheduled for observation when they should have been.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

The motivation for setting up TaLOS (Teaching and Learning Observation System) was to make the teaching and learning observation cycle more efficient and transparent to a wider circle of people.

“We wanted to raise the profile of teaching and learning, and also ensure that every learner gets the best experience possible.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

Before TaLOS, the team would have to wait a number of weeks after an observation to get the data ready for reporting. And although that left the observation team enough time to raise issues and allocate CPD, it wasn’t good enough.

“We were wasting weeks’ worth of delivery to learners. If a particular issue was identified it would take too long before it was being addressed. We wanted to ensure that any support could be put in place as soon as possible.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development
The activity

“Four and half years ago we had a meeting with the various stakeholders to find out where technology could have an impact on teaching and learning.”
Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

As a result, the college implemented the initial TaLOS teaching and learning observation system.

They ran with a sole observation system for around a year to see if it was going to have an impact. The actual grades of level 1 and 2 (good or better) lesson observations, following Ofsted criteria, saw small improvements over the first couple of years, but there were no groundbreaking results.

The college worked to make sure that the core data the system was producing was accurate, and once they were sure that TaLOS was working, they began to build.

In the middle of the 2008/09 academic year Mark’s development team worked with the quality and learning team to link in TaLOS with the professional development reviews (PDRs) appraisal system and the CPD system.

“...the TaLOS observation system was quick and easy to implement and took no longer than six weeks from a development point of view. We then had the training sessions for staff as and when they were needed. We had two developers working on this particular system part time so the installation was...”
The CPD system initially worked on an access database and involved a considerable amount of rekeying for reports. Developing that system took around six weeks to change and integrate with the TaLOS, and the PDR system took around three weeks to develop.

“I am sure we have made cost-savings going the bespoke route as we have spent the time developing the system, testing it and making it work to fit our processes. We felt that there would be less risk developing it in-house than buying something external and hoping it would work with our processes.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

The system has evolved, and has had to develop over the past two years to respond to changes in the FE sector and the common inspection framework.

“For example, there is now a stronger, more explicit focus on safeguarding. By developing in-house it’s a half hour job to add in a new safeguarding module rather than paying someone externally a substantial amount of money for a new one.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

Mark and his team have had good engagement from staff from the very start, and one of the main reasons behind the success has been the buy-in from senior management.

“Right from the off they have seen the potential. With single source data, the general ethos has been if you need anything, come to us.

“If the principal wants to investigate a certain issue that has been highlighted he can sit at his desk and look at live figures and information very easily on the web, rather than have arms of paper reports that are out of date as soon as they are produced.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development
All scheduled and completed observations can be viewed by the quality and learning team on the Talos Admin screen.

The team has kept an open door policy, so if members of staff need assistance with any of the systems they can arrange informal sessions. As a consequence, it’s been quite easy to gain the confidence of many staff.

One of the main obstacles has been dealing with fear of change in some of the observees.

“We haven’t had any real obstacles with TaLOS. We only have 10-15 people, including the observers and staff from quality and learning that have to directly input into the system, the rest of the staff are just able to view the relevant reports.

“However, with the PDR appraisal system there has been a little more resistance. The professional development reviews are designed to be more focussed than our old academic appraisals. The main concern from a minority of staff was that they liked to discuss a wide variety of topics and felt that the online system would prevent this. Once staff realised that the new system was not going to be a purely online function and there was still the discussion with their line manager this resistance faded.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development
The outcomes

“The integration of the systems has certainly helped to improve the teaching and learning environment and more learners are succeeding than they were two years ago.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

On the front page of the intranet the systems team has included a table showing the percentage of Ofsted standard grade 1 and 2 lessons that the college has.

“We are really putting the standard of teaching and learning at the top of the agenda, and we include the live summary observations data on the intranet home page to motivate staff to continue in their development.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

This fully integrated observation cycle helps to raise the profile of a number of different themes and issues to members of staff. It also helps to reinforce college priorities and values through the continuous observation, appraisal and CPD cycle.

“Most of the staff like the system as they can see their whole observation, PDR, and CPD history on one page. They can keep the areas of improvement fresh in their minds.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

Staff can view all of their scheduled and completed performance reviews
Observers and observees can see details of past observations, and view observees’ strengths, areas of improvement and training needs

The system has benefitted staff through an increased level of support, and senior management and heads of department have benefitted from a better quality and better transparency of data.

“The TaLOS system allows me to direct my time and staff resources to the teachers or teams that most need development. The close working relationship between quality and learning and systems development has ensured that what has been designed fully meets the needs of those who use the systems.” Penny Petch, Head of Teaching and Learning Development

“Teaching and learning are central to the purpose of the college. Improving in this area needed a systematic approach and the TaLOS system enabled resources to be targeted where there would be greatest impact. A detailed understanding of all the inter-linked information which TaLOS affords has meant efficient and effective intervention leading to significantly better teaching and learning” David Law, Principal
Staff can see their scheduled and completed observations quickly and easily

The college’s 2010 Ofsted Report has also highlighted the significant role that the information systems team has played in the development of the teaching and learning environment.

“The clear online links between self-assessment, action plans, performance review, lesson observations and the college improvement plan provide strong support for timely intervention and the effective monitoring of progress towards targets.

“The observation of teaching and learning is well established and has led to improvements in the proportion of teaching judged to be good or better.

“Quality improvement is especially well supported through accurate and accessible data.”

The impact

- 70.2% of teaching and learning observations achieved grade 1 or 2 (good or better) in 2008/09
- 81.3% of teaching and learning observations achieved grade 1 or 2 (good or better) in 2009/10
“In the last four years our overall college success rates have gone up by more than 10 percentage points, and that’s with 800 additional students joining the college.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

Looking back, Mark and his team can now see the massive impact that single source data can have on quality improvement.

Administrative savings have been made, and the system has also saved the college money for CPD, as they are targeting professional development more efficiently now.

**The lessons learned**

For other colleges looking to implement a similar system, Mark believes you should spend as much time as possible getting the foundations right.

“We were perhaps a couple of years behind the boom in VLEs in the early 2000s when a lot of them came out and were dumped and then restarted. We certainly learnt a lot from those colleges, and as a result, we didn’t jump into anything.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

The team spent a substantial amount of time getting the foundations right, ensuring the scheduling, timetabling and course files were all accurate and correct.

“We spent so much time at the back end, making sure everything was accurate and accessible, and that saved so much time at the front end. And, although getting it right the first time is everyone’s aim, it’s worth spending that extra time making it easier for the user. With everything in systems, integration is the key.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

The team now aims to continue improving the system in order to drive up the grade profile of the college.

“Our goal for the future, even though it might seem unachievable, is to have 100% good or better lessons.” Mark Emerson, Head of Information Systems & Development

**Useful links**

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