Action for Children – Introducing collaborative learning using Google Apps for Education

Summary

Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer for Action Training, has created a bespoke virtual learning environment utilising Google Apps for Education. Learners and trainers are now more fulfilled as they have greater ownership of their learning environment and can pick which applications best suit their learning needs. They can also work more collaboratively as they are able to share documents with other learners and trainers between different locations.

About Action for Children

Action Training is a project funded by the YPLA (Young People’s Learning Agency) for the national charity Action for Children. Based at two delivery centres in Dereham and Kings Lynn, Action Training delivers a Foundation Learning Program for 16-18 year olds in personal development, and functional and vocational skills.

They also currently work on a European Social Fund (ESF) Program aiming to re-engage those at risk of exclusion from mainstream education.

The challenge

Action Training has two centres, 30 miles apart, in the East Anglia region. Both locations have a very slow intranet and a limited number of computers with access to the internet.

“Our learners’ PCs ran more up-to-date software than the organisational computers. Most teaching resources were owned by the individual tutor and sporadically uploaded to the intranet, with no access possible outside of the office. As our learners are dispersed so widely across the East Anglia region they have always been at the mercy of public transport.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training
The motivation for setting up the Google Sites VLE was to bring together both the tutors and the learners into a shared area to promote collaboration and shared working practices.

“This would allow us to answer Ofsted feedback relating to cross-site synchronicity, in relation to uniform practice in delivery (Schemes of Work, Lesson Plans and Resources, Policy and Procedure Documents being available to all) and data sharing. It would also afford us the opportunity to support learners who had difficulty accessing our services because of geography and the previous intranet system.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

Before Paul set up the Google Sites VLE the learning environment consisted of an organisational intranet and a set of standalone desktops/laptops. There was a shared drive for each location, but this only allowed the PCs within that location to store files.

Paul had been looking at different learning platforms, such as Moodle, but because of the small groups of learners he works with, around 10 per class, he believed that commercial platforms would be ‘overkill’ for their learning environment and difficult to maintain.

“We did however recognise that we needed to provide a learning environment that would streamline both tutor and learner workloads and also promote sharing. As learners could not access the intranet and staff could not access the learners’ shared drive from the intranet, a system was required that crossed this divide.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

The activity

Paul first became interested in Google Apps for Education after watching a presentation by Mark Allen from Edintheclouds.com at a TeachMeet event.
“Once I had an overview of what could be achieved I contacted Mark and we arranged to meet to discuss whether Google Apps could provide our solution. Mark assisted us greatly in both time and knowledge for which we are extremely grateful.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

Paul’s learners suggested that the Google site name should be Bovered.net and Mark registered this with Google and spent time with Paul creating an icon driven interface for the learners and staff to use.

“In the first instance I worked with one other member of staff, Christine Bramham, and a small group of learners to test the system functionality. We now use the system with all members of staff, learners within our foundation learning program and, currently, one school via an ESF funded YouthEast project.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

The timescales for the project moved very quickly for Paul. After he had purchased the package it took him only one month to introduce the site to his students.

As a children’s charity, Action for Children had no budget to work with so the system had to be more or less free. Google charges $10 per year for access to the domain and all the applications currently loaded are free.

“One of the greatest benefits of using Google is that new apps are constantly being released into the marketplace and these can be incorporated into the environment, once they are evaluated, in a matter of minutes.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

The only real obstacle that Paul has faced during the project has been ‘change’. Members of staff have found it difficult to undertake training on the new learning platform because of the distance between the two delivery centres.

This problem is now being addressed with instructional videos (see useful links section below) and by the hosting of in-house training sessions.

At certain times the progress of students and staff has been hindered by logistical and geographical issues.

“The most significant problem in terms of staff is that I am based in Dereham and the majority of staff are based in Kings Lynn. This has made it difficult to discuss issues and demonstrate solutions.

“Staff have been a little slower to adapt, because the system has been implemented during the busy school year. They will be able to use the summer break to develop their practices.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

Fortunately it has been relatively easy for Paul and the team to gain the trust of learners.
“The process of promotion has been through ‘use’ of the system. Google Docs has given learners the opportunity to share work and ideas with classmates and this has generated acceptance of the system.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training.

As the students have been very quick to adapt to the system this has enabled Paul to spend more time interacting with his learners.

**The outcomes**

Action for Children now has a learning platform which is:

- **Flexible** - Content is included to meet learner needs and learners can request applications be added or deleted;
- **Reliable** - Google has a 99.99% uptime guarantee;
- **Virtually cost free** - the only physical cost is the annual $10 domain hosting fee;
- **Learner-centered** - the name of the domain was chosen by the students and the content is influenced by what they use.

The system has benefited students by helping them to develop their creativity and flexibility. It provides real world scenarios and in alliance with a range of web-based tools the learners are developing ILT skills to fit specific tasks set by Paul.

By having a range of different tools within the platform, learners can choose to use the ones they feel most comfortable with.
“For example, we currently have six different presentation applications available for them to use. One of our groups took part in a team-building task, which required the production of an annotated photo album that had to be embedded within another application.

“The class were given the option of different products with a 50/50 split between the two. Both products did achieve the required goal but the learner feedback was quite different. So much so that one of the products may soon be replaced by something else.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

As a direct result of using the apps, the students have benefited as they have learnt how to work as a team, evaluate the usefulness of different web tools, as well as learn different web skills such as producing an annotated photo album and embedding within applications.

Student feedback has been very positive.

“I like using this programme because it’s easier and quicker to share the documents and work as a group.”

“I think the sharing program is good because it’s a lot easier to get a better standard of work all working on one piece”

The staff have also benefited greatly, by having:

• A ‘One-stop shop’ for all of their resources, which is available, anytime and anywhere;

• Templates - they have created a number of templates for schemes of work, lesson plans and reviews;
• Forms - created by staff to gather learner feedback on course content, delivery and support processes.

Staff feedback has also been very encouraging.

“I feel that Paul's development of the VLE is helping the project to move into the 21st century. It will enable us to engage with learners who are unable to travel to our training centres.

“Learners are also able to access resources to work on in their own time and receive feedback from staff almost immediately.” Linda Buller, Deputy Project Manager, Action Training

“I like the fact that documents are bi-directional when shared with learners so that feedback on work becomes a conversation. All of the learners' work is stored in one place, and the online templates are quick and easy to use.

“I can see straight away when a document is amended by anyone it has been shared with. I think the development of an e-portfolio will allow us to help the students present themselves better when they leave us.” Christine Bramham, Participation Worker.

The impact

Paul and his team now have a platform which is flexible to the needs of learners, can support teaching and provide data for analysis by stakeholders.

It is anticipated that the long term impact will be to improve the quality of learner portfolios due to the real-time assessment and sharing opportunities.

“I believe it will also increase retention and achievement due to the learners having a 'voice' in terms of content which will encourage participation. In terms of teaching, the ability to share resources and ideas between the two locales will increase efficiency for staff and thus create time within the working day to develop a wider range of resources.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training
Three learners working together on one spreadsheet

An example of the chat options available for collaborative learning

Although it is still very early in the life of the project, indications are very positive regarding the impact on achievement, recruitment and retention.
The schools project currently has a 100% retention rate and most, if not all, of these learners will complete their portfolios on time and to the required standard.

One consistent feedback that Paul and his team receive from employers is the lack of flexibility and creativity in relation to problem-solving and communication within today’s school leavers.

“By using a system that deals with problem-solving and communications issues we believe we are developing digital users and not product specific users. The development of soft skills in flexibility and creativity allow our students to develop a ‘can do’ attitude that is not inhibited by unfamiliar environments.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

In terms of teaching the ability to quickly create, share and amend resources amongst the staff team ‘creates’ valuable time to evaluate the quality and relevance of these resources and create new ones.

The lessons learned

Looking back Paul and his team have realised that VLEs can be ‘fun and interactive’ environments where both teachers and learners can share in the learner journey.

For other education providers looking to implement a similar system, Paul believes you should approach any new technology with an open mind.

“Don’t believe you have to know how to use the various products available to you, I certainly didn’t, the students will show you. Make sure you include your learners in the initial ‘look and feel’ as they will be the ones using it most of the time.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

Paul would also encourage others to make use of the Google Docs template library as having a consistent look helps to give a sense of ‘togetherness’ for staff and student work, and for the group as a whole.

Because of the fluid nature of using Web 2.0 tools Paul believes you should utilise social networking sites to share information and advice.

“You can find solutions by using Twitter to find examples of shared ideas, for instance #ukedchat and web20education have provided me with valuable resources, as have a number of individuals on Twitter.

“I have only two requirements for new opportunities: is it free? And does it provide me with an embed code that will allow learners to embed their work into e-portfolios?” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

In the future, Paul aims to be proactive in finding the right resources in order to develop his learners’ abilities.
“I hope to create an interface that better reflects the non-linear nature of learning. I also don’t want to lose sight of the fact that the system is there, primarily, for learning, and this will always require a constant dialogue with the learners regarding content.” Paul Kendrick, Vocational Trainer, Action Training

Useful links

http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/

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