Epping Forest College: Use of Xerte to enhance collaborative learning

Summary

Souad Kouachi, a Science Lecturer at Epping Forest College has utilised the Xerte Online Toolkit (XOLTK) to create a collaborative learning environment for her students. Souad briefed her learners on how to use the Xerte Online Toolkit to develop dynamic learning objects. Her learners were soon able to create presentations containing learning objects as well as assessment activities, which they now use in the classroom with their peers to reinforce learning.

About Epping Forest College

Based in Loughton, Essex, more than 3,500 learners study at Epping Forest College each year. Students are able to complete A-Levels, vocational courses and apprenticeships in a variety of subjects from ICT to brickwork, and from performing arts to business studies.

The challenge

“The learning environment used to be teacher-centred, but after using the Xerte Online Toolkit we moved immediately to a learner-centred collaborative one.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Until last year, Souad had very limited ILT skills and was fortunate enough to be mentored by one of her students as part of an innovative student e-mentoring scheme to support staff and peers in disseminating ILT knowledge and skills.

The scheme gave Souad a new set of ILT-related skills, which in turn gave her more confidence to explore new technologies.

“I noticed that my new skills and confidence had a motivational impact on my students. I began to use a greater range of activities to stimulate different

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learning styles, which made lessons more entertaining and fun.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

One of the main challenges Souad used to face was keeping learners stimulated.

“We wanted to enable students to develop by stimulating them with a more dynamic classroom. We hoped to increase their engagement and wanted to give them the tools to self-direct improvements.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Souad soon realised that the Xerte Online Toolkit could improve, enhance and diversify the learning environment by engaging learners.

“I believed that by stretching and challenging them to create their own learning objects in Xerte, this would promote a deeper learning and understanding of their subjects.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Using the interactive and dynamic content in Xerte, Souad aimed to work with her learners to develop a set of teaching and learning materials that were fully accessible to all.

Xerte learning objects can contain a variety of dynamic content, including videos

“Using the templates offered by Xerte gave me lots of different ways of putting together training and activities. It was easy to create without having to worry about the technology.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

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The activity

Souad was first introduced to the Xerte Online Toolkit during a RSC London training course at the Islington Centre in February 2011.

“Only one week after I attended the training course in London I delivered a short one-hour Xerte induction training session to my learners. With guidance, students immediately started to create learning objects, presenting them and using them to test their peers’ understanding and learning.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

At the very beginning some learners had problems with anti-virus software on their computers and kept losing their work.

And although learners lost their work three or four times, it taught them the process of creating the learning objects. As a result, they asked to have the log-in for the Xerte account so they could finish the work at home.

Some of the interactive tools the students used for their own learning objects included:

Xerte learning objects can contain a variety of dynamic content, including interactive images.
• The hotspot diagram - which can be clicked or rolled over to trigger a response;

• Word gap fill interactive exercise – the correct words/terms need to be entered;

• Drag and drop – interactive labelling diagram, certain items can be dropped to certain words.

Souad faced a few small obstacles whilst implementing the system, with issues concerning the inclusion of maths, equations and physics symbols within the learning objects.

Some less experienced staff and students have faced certain technical barriers using the toolkit, but Souad hopes they will develop a range of skills with training in the future.

"We hope to build a real community of practice here at Epping Forest College. After they have had adequate training, I believe teachers and learners will find Xerte a really powerful tool." Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Souad received a great deal of support from the Head of e-Learning and Innovation, Vikki Liogier.
“I used to be slightly fearful of technology and had zero knowledge of ILT. With Vikki’s motivation and knowledge she made it very easy for me to learn more about Xerte.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

And after she had received the encouragement of Vikki it wasn’t difficult for Souad to convince staff of the value of the toolkit.

“I encouraged staff to attend a ‘bitesize’ Xerte training course, which helped to improve their teaching as well as their engagement with learners.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

**The outcomes**

The learners were engaged immediately. During their first session with the Toolkit they began to take ownership of their learning and relished the opportunity to present to the rest of the class.

The learners have benefited greatly from using Xerte. They now have:

- Confidence to present their work to an audience;
- Ability to translate their knowledge to their classmates through teaching resources and appropriate assessment activities;
- Deeper knowledge of their subjects;
- Problem-solving, communication and presentation skills.

“As you give the students the opportunity to teach and test others it means they have to dismantle what they understand so they can convey it better. That attitude to learning has enabled the students to progress as they have put themselves in the teacher’s position.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation

Using Xerte, the learners enjoy their subjects more and understand them better.

“They had to create the right questions and answers to pass on knowledge of the subject in an effective way. As a result they began to own their learning and teaching, and that made them shoot ahead in terms of skills, understanding and motivation.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation

Some of the students have given their feedback on the benefits of the Xerte Online Toolkit.

“These activities have helped to increase my understanding of biology. I was following and registering clearly each of the points that were being made. This has allowed me to learn much more, enhance my knowledge and store the information from the usage of ILT.” Science Student, Epping Forest College
Students enjoy working collaboratively and presenting their knowledge to the rest of the class using Xerte

“These group tasks help us to work together and form good relationships as we are able to talk and compare ideas. The use of IT has made learning more fun.” Science Student, Epping Forest College

Staff using Xerte have benefited greatly. Before Souad was e-mentored she had never used ILT in the classroom, but she now uses the smartboard, Moodle, Xerte and other e-Resources in most of her lessons.

“Souad is unstoppable. She now realises that e-Learning platforms are a great tool to deliver and enhance training, and make for a more dynamic classroom. I think she’s made tremendous progress. Two years ago she would have never used ILT, but now she is an e-Learning Coach.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation

The impact

The Xerte Online Toolkit has made a tremendous impact on Souad’s teaching and learning environment with quantifiable improvements in attendance, retention and achievement:

- Average results before Xerte - 10 credits;
- Average results whilst using Xerte – 19 credits;
- Classroom attendance : 94% before Xerte - 98% whilst using Xerte;
- 100% retention rate – the joint highest rate in the College;
95% of the students using Xerte in Souad’s classroom were awarded distinctions.

These graphs show how student grades have improved significantly since the introduction of Xerte

“The Xerte Online Toolkit has helped my learners to work collaboratively, and I believe that they now retain information longer than before, when they were working alone. This self-directed learning has encouraged my learners to engage and focus on improving the quality of their work.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

The impact of the Xerte Online Toolkit has not just been felt by the Science subjects, but by the whole college.

“Souad Kouachi’s e-Learning project was highly successful in moving from a teacher centred mode of delivery to a collaborative one and has had a great motivational impact on the learners. As a result, Epping Forest College is currently deploying Xerte in-house. Being a learner centred organisation is one of our strategic aims. We are working closely with Vikki Liogier, to embed further the use of technologies to enhance learning and give ownership to the learners.” Jeannie Wright, Interim Principal, Epping Forest College

The Xerte Online Toolkit has encouraged collaborative learning, which has made the teaching and learning environment more inclusive.

“The Toolkit has provided innovative and flexible approaches to learning, supporting vulnerable or disadvantaged students through peer support. This
has helped to increase students’ self-confidence and self-esteem.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Souad also believes the Toolkit has had an impact on various areas of the classroom:

- It has helped students actively construct content;
- Encouraged them to take ownership of their learning;
- Resolved group conflicts and improved team working skills and social skills;
- Enhanced critical thinking, allowing students to discuss, clarify and evaluate ideas, sharing responsibility with one another;
- Raised individual accountability and interdependence;

The impact of the Xerte online toolkit hasn’t just been felt by the learners. The teacher has now moved to a facilitator role, guiding the students through self-directed collaborative learning.

Souad also believes that her learners will now find university much easier. As the students have learnt how to create their own learning materials and have taught their classmates they now have the skills to be more independent and to carry out their own research.

**The lessons learned**

Souad would advise other teachers to listen and interact with students when they are working with a tool like Xerte, as she has learnt many skills and tricks from them.

“The more you go into the toolkit, the more you discover, so I would advise others to try it, really explore, have no fears and get really stuck in.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences

Now that Souad has experienced the possibilities offered by ILT, she is already planning future improvements to the teaching and learning environment.

“I would now like to create a discussion forum where students could post their developed Xerte learning object links. This would be a good way to drive peer review and provide extra opportunities for learning outside the classroom.” Souad Kouachi, Lecturer in Sciences
Useful links

http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/xerte/

Video of students’ activities and comments

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