Oakland’s College: Creating Collaborative Classrooms Online with LAMS (The Learning Activity Management System)

Summary

e-Learning Developer, Charlie Williams, has improved efficiencies at Oakland’s College with the introduction of LAMS, the Learning Activity Management System. Charlie has worked alongside teachers at the College to create activities for a range of individual tasks, small group work and whole classes, based on online content and collaboration. Since 2010, this blended learning environment has improved retention as students can work at hours that suit them, and has given teachers more time to work on future lessons and other tasks.

About Oakland’s College

Oakland’s College has campuses in Welwyn Garden City and St. Albans, and a further training provision in Borehamwood.

Achieving an overall 'Good' in their Ofsted inspection, the college provides education for 10,000 students.

They provide a wide range of courses, both part-time and full-time, including arts, media, publishing, health, public services, construction, horticulture, equine, beauty, music, and forensic science.

The college also runs their own work-based learning programmes, with close links to local employers, and offer apprenticeships and entry to employment.

The challenge

Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer said “We wanted to take the lesson structure of a standard classroom and replicate it in an online environment.”
Although the college already had Moodle in place, Charlie and his team thought that it was difficult to provide a whole sequence of different activities for learning. Charlie detailed, “You can link content and interactive quizzes with SCORM, but learners are not interacting with other people, just Moodle. LAMS focuses more on learner collaboration.”

Before the e-Learning team introduced LAMS, very few people had been trying to deliver structured content across the college. Staff might have used Moodle to support face-to-face lessons and revision, but it was rarely used for actually delivering new content.

Through LAMS the college were able to structure a lesson and guide a student through the lesson materials, as you would in a classroom. With the system they were able to create a warm-up exercise, a recap, some presentation of new materials, with comprehension checking questions at the end.

**The activity**

Oakland’s College first started looking at ways of structuring blended learning back in 2009-10. The college had a campus in Borehamwood, and students used to travel there from South London three days a week.

Charlie Williams noted “These students were travelling all the way across London to come to college one day a week for just 3 hours.”

As a result, the college began to investigate different types of blended learning.

“We looked at using different online tools to support these students so they didn’t have to come in for the half day. We looked at the impending funding cuts and realised we needed to improve online delivery. Moodle wasn’t really fit for purpose for those types of students who needed a bit more guidance and structure.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer

Charlie first saw LAMS in action at an event in Cambridge in 2005, so he knew it was a well-established product.
As it became more and more apparent that there were going to be funding cuts, the e-Learning team decided to install LAMS.

They created some demonstration activities and showcased the system during a staff development workshop at the end of the 2009/10 academic year. Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer explains “For the first half hour of the session we didn’t talk about software at all, but asked the participants to simply visualise a standard lesson situation. We then tried to put the classroom environment, the group work, and presentations into LAMS.”

Staff began to use the system for sessions to help complement and replace some face-to-face learning. The e-Learning team then created some tutorial activities using LAMS, including one on independent online learning.
LAMS really took off at the start of the 2010/11 academic year. Health and Social Care teacher Antoinette Abunaw-Akinola started using the system with her Level 3 BTEC students.

“Her students understood how the structured format of LAMS was beneficial to their learning. They couldn’t skip any activities, and could only complete the sessions after they had made enough forum entries and answered all of the questions.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer

Antoinette went on to use LAMS every couple of weeks, putting together a lesson structure with the e-Learning team.

“She created a basic structure whereby it was very easy to change the lesson content. It gave her and her students more flexibility, and while the better students could go on and cover the work, she was able to support failing students she might otherwise have lost.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer
The team didn’t encounter many obstacles when installing LAMS, as the system is:

- Open source;
- Simple to install onto a server;
- Easy to integrate with Moodle.

The IT team just needed to place it on a sub-domain, so it was available for people to use outside the college.

However, the e-Learning team did encounter opposition from some staff, who had reservations about why the system was being introduced. Charlie Williams said “There were some who were quite against it, and asked whether it would replace face-to-face teaching. However, some staff were aware that it could help them.”

**The outcomes**

To create a collaborative, online classroom environment, tutors and students have benefited from the full repository of activities in LAMS.

- Forums - students can now collaborate on projects, discuss ideas and extend their knowledge;
- Image galleries – one tutor used the photo gallery in LAMS for students to post images for inspiration. They were also able to comment on these;
- Mindmaps – have been used collaboratively by students and staff to plan projects and group work;
- Q&As - teachers have set questions, and on the following page students view their fellow students’ answers, in order to learn from each others’ mistakes;
- Wikis – have been used for students to collaborate on projects.
Creating a lesson using using activities on the authoring page

Lesson templates and activities can be easily shared when they are made public on the LAMS database. It is also easy to create an empty lesson template where you can place content such as:

- PowerPoint’s;
- iSpring Flash presentations; YouTube videos;
- Set of weblinks.

“You can also have a generic forum with prompts so people can test their prior knowledge. You could make the questions generic enough, so when you want to create a new lesson you can just change certain words accordingly.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer

- Students and teachers have benefited from the introduction of LAMS in a number of ways:
- Students now have more flexibility as they can learn when and where they like online;
- They can save money and time as they don’t have to make long journey in order to learn;

- Tutors are now able to support students who need extra help, while others can continue working at their own pace online.

If an educational establishment is aiming to replace some face-to-face learning with an online lesson, Charlie believes there are a number of benefits using LAMS.

“LAMS is not just about knowing that a student got 4 out of 5 on a multiple choice test. Tutors can check that the students understand subjects through the forums, and then build future learning activities by seeing what their answers and problems were.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer

Tutors are also able to look at data and graphs, which show how much time students have spent on an activity. Tutors might see that a learner spent 5 minutes looking at the presentation, and then 20 minutes discussing it on the forum, which is good for evidencing student activity, especially with guided learning hours.

Music Teacher, Alan Richardson, has used LAMS since the beginning of the 2010/11 academic year to help his students with revision during half-term breaks.

“LAMS has really benefited the students as it has allowed them to revise all the units and subjects throughout the year. It has also helped me to teach a very broad subject.” Alan Richardson, Music Teacher

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Students have given their feedback on the benefits of LAMS:

“It worked really well, and makes you think a bit more independently.”

“I've never done this sort of thing, but I enjoyed it more than I would going through my notes.”

“I liked that we had to work things out for ourselves, instead of just being told what to do. By working it out myself, I felt like I had learnt more.”

The impact

Charlie and his team believe that LAMS could be an important component in allowing FE students to study independently. Giving learners more flexibility and freedom could possibly solve problems with students dropping out of college because of other commitments. Charlie reiterated; “If you’re a student and you have to work, or you care for someone, it can be difficult to follow the regimented timetable. If there is some flexibility in the learning delivery, it should enable more students to continue their studies.”

LAMS could also work to improve efficiencies throughout the whole college, in the long-term, if a teacher were to use it regularly over a year.

• The first time LAMS is used the students would work on the two hour independent online learning tutorial, freeing the teacher up for two hours;

• In those two hours the teacher can work with the e-Learning team to develop the session for next week;

• The week after the teacher would do more e-learning development for future lessons on their own.

“Eventually the idea is that the teacher will get to the point where they can create easily editable templates for future lessons. This means teachers can then spend time performing other essential tasks.” Charlie Williams, e-Learning Developer

The lessons learned

During the two years since Charlie first introduced LAMS to Oakland’s College he has a learnt many lessons about the problems and challenges one can face when implementing an online learning platform. Charlie explained; “I would advise other providers looking to implement a similar system to try to make a clear link between what they are already doing in class and how they can adapt it to an online platform.”
Useful links

http://www.oaklands.ac.uk/

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