Alliance Learning: Revolutionising the way they work with an online learner management system

Summary

Since May 2012 Paul Cocker, Operation Executive and the Senior Management Team of Alliance Learning have introduced an online learner management system for every learner, requiring significant investment in systems, hardware, acceptance by staff and above all, time and commitment from the management team. This organisation has taken the radical step to overcome one of the major barriers to achieve its goal by dedicating three periods of two weeks where the business has closed for staff CPD training. A total of 500 man hours were invested to implement the online system. This is an excellent model of how to make these major changes effective in the shortest time.

About Alliance Learning

Bolton Training Group and CLEEA Training amalgamated in 2001 producing an independent training provider with a reputation for quality and commitment.

The challenge

Paul created an Information and Learning Technology (ILT) strategy about four years ago after meeting with Colin Gallacher, RSC Northwest e-Learning Adviser. Alliance Learning proceeded to invest in resources and infrastructure such as interactive whiteboards, voting systems and Moodle. However, they still needed to demonstrate the impact this technology was having on learners.

The Common Inspection Framework dramatically changed last year, moving the emphasis from quality of data to teaching, learning and assessment and independent learning. Alliance Learning realised they would need to implement new systems to comply with these changes.

The activity

Paul created a strategic proposal for the board to impress how important the ILT strategy was.
They needed investment in:

- human capital to attract new staff;
- time for existing staff through effective CPD. They requested that the whole teaching staff have seven weeks off per year for development time; to develop teaching practices and resources on Moodle; and
- physical resources to give staff the tools to enable ‘outstanding’ grades in their teaching and learning observations.

They now have interactive resources for learners on Moodle. There is a repository for staff to put schemes of work and lessons plans - if someone is absent lesson plans and resources can be easily accessed by another employee. Previously Moodle was hardly used. It has now been revamped and eventually everyone will use it. Currently 60% of lesson plans and schemes of work are on there and 50% of resources. By the end of 2013 Moodle will be fully populated.

Colin and Anita Holt from Jisc gave help with this and the training. They showcased free interactive resources.

Paul explains: “It was vital getting Jisc involved doing that training; we are looking to repeat this for all our Learning and Development Officers.”

Colin and Anita showed the Tutors how to use learning websites and interactive online games to make lessons more interactive and to check that learning has actually taken place. This has benefitted the tutors significantly in helping engage the learners effectively and in turn increase the gradings of our observation.

Paul explains the impact on one particular member of staff: “We had a tutor who was not confident in the use of ICT and required this additional support. By giving the tutor support to improve his practice, the tutor then consistently increased his observation Grades.”

They created a new Independent Learning Zone (ILZ) where learners and staff can go to conduct independent learning. Significant investment in resources included a library with a variety of textbook and journals that are on offer to use in the ILZ and can also be loaned out to learners for the duration of their programme. A bank of laptops was also purchased to allow learner to access websites and conduct independent research for projects.

Paul explains: “The new inspection framework says we should be stretching and challenging our learners. If you’ve got a class where some learners might have already completed their work or wish to improve their grades, we offer them the opportunity to go to the Independent Learning Zone under directive study to complete independent research and then they return to class and feedback to their peers.”

A bonus structure has been introduced. Their aim is to get a minimum of 80% Grade 1 and 2 in observation of teaching, learning and assessment by the end of the year.
as part of their strategic business plan and as part of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment strategy. They have brought a new initiative in that states if a tutor or learning development officer gets two Grade 1 or 2s within the year, they’ll receive a bonus for this achievement.

**The outcomes**

Alliance Learning invested a lot of time in staff CPD with a full week’s shut down and training from Jisc on different interactive resources. After the training they asked the staff what they needed to make their lessons “outstanding”. Everything requested was provided and the majority of lessons (84%) since then have been Grade 1s or 2s.

Consoles in workshops were introduced so learners can access Moodle and resources in the classroom. Classroom style teaching can now occur in the workshops saving tutors and learners huge amounts of time.

All front line delivery staff now have iPads. Learners can now be assessed in the workshops and the workplace. E-portfolios can be accessed in the field from iPads which cuts down on paperwork and saves time.

Tracking candidates has improved since the introduction of OneFile. In the past it was nearly impossible to know exactly where a learner was up to as this was tracked by reviews. By having OneFile every part of the qualification is recorded alongside their progression. It is easy to see who is on and behind target and effective performance management strategies are in place to positively manage this.

If learners don’t have laptops they can use their phones. If that’s not possible, work can be written by hand and a photo uploaded. OneFile doesn’t preclude those who can’t use computers.
Internal Verifiers (IV) and External Verifiers (EV) can access OneFile from home and see all the evidence they need. As they are no longer required to come into the centre mileage costs are saved.

OneFile can run reports on assessors and which of their candidates have any work overdue, on portfolios not accessed by learners, completed portfolios, completion rates, comments to assessors from IVs, assessor caseloads and anything else of interest. There is now nowhere to hide for learners or assessors as everything is tracked.

John Holland, Business Administration Apprentice explains: “There are many things I like about OneFile. I like that I can view my progress through my NVQ, allowing me to see which units I have completed and giving an overall percentage of how far through I am and also whether I’m on target to achieving my qualification. I also like the Gap Analysis feature, which shows what areas still need to be done to progress through my NVQ. OneFile also promotes Independent Learning and Independent Study through the easy-to-use e-portfolio system that is provided.”

The impact

The management team rolled OneFile out to all candidates from 1st August 2012. The e-portfolio was bought in June and up and running by 1st August. 500 man hours were put in on top of a normal workload. It was worth the time as otherwise it would have taken an extra 1-2 years.

Staff were involved and on-board from the start as they were shown how easy it would be to use and how much time and work it would save.

Examples of how the e-portfolio has helped to improve things for Alliance Learning and their staff:

- The Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is now on the e-portfolio. This includes all basic details, timesheet table, review table, standards, journals and more. This cuts down tutor admin time and eventually will make audits a lot easier.

- The reporting function on OneFile makes it easy to see overdue tasks by learner or assessor. A weekly report helps management keep on top of learners so they don’t fall behind. Success rates have improved and learners stay on-board as problems are highlighted within a week. Before information was based on reviews every 6-8 weeks, meaning problems could have escalated. Success rates are now approaching 90%, 15% above national average.

- Money is already being saved through mileage claims, paper costs, printing standards, reviews and much more.

- In the long term staff caseloads should increase to bring in extra income as they will be able to cope with more candidates.
Alliance Learning is aiming to be a paperless organisation. They can enrol new learners onto qualifications and create an ILP which will populate the rest of the information required within the e-portfolio. This speeds up inductions, reviews and much more. It reduces admin so more time can be spent on giving Information, Advice and Guidance.

Lauren Brophy, Learning Development Officer in Childcare explains: “As part of my company’s ILT strategy we have been recently issued with iPads. Since receiving this advanced technology there has been a significant change in workplace productivity. Having this technology available helps me to support my learners more effectively. Through using the iPad I have regular access to emails and can directly contact learners through their online portfolios without having to worry about getting back to the office to do so. Being issued with the iPad also supports the delivery of coaching sessions, having direct access to websites and videos that I can show learners whilst providing them with the underpinning knowledge that they need in company has shown a significant increase in learner engagement and in turn sufficient production of evidence.”

**The lessons learned**

Paul Cocker explains:

“There is always something that can be done to improve ILT. We have consciously said as an organisation this is the way to go.

You need buy in from everybody: the board, senior managers, middle managers, staff, learners and employers. Explain to all stakeholders why you are doing it, what it is you are going to do and the impact it will have on their roles. You need to take them all on the journey with you so that they embrace and can see the relevance and importance of what you are ultimately trying to achieve. Continued Professional Development and Time are the key factors in making this successful and making key decisions to change to ILT as the way you work, not something that is offered as additional.

If we don’t have this technology then learners will go elsewhere. It is what they expect now. There are many areas where this is saving us money – paper, mileage, improved success rates.

We are 100% advocates of ILT now.”

**Useful links**

- [Jisc RSC Northwest](http://www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies)
- [Alliance Learning](http://www.alliancelearning.co.uk)
- [Moodle](http://moodle.org)
- [OneFile](http://www.onefile.org.uk)
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