City College Southampton: Striving for Gold with Moodle benchmarking scheme

Summary

How do you answer the question: “How well is your VLE being used?” City College Southampton rose to the challenge with the creation, development and implementation of a highly motivational ‘Gold, Silver and Bronze’ benchmarking system to evaluate and recognise quality of content and activity on its College Moodle system. The results are impressive.

About City College Brighton

City College is a further education college in the centre of Southampton, offering high-quality courses at every level to students of all ages. Achievement is high, with adult students achieving a 95% pass rate across short courses in 2008. Full-time students study a wide range of courses including BTECs, NVQs and GCSEs. City College understands the importance of career building and has excellent links with local employers through its work-based learning brand, City Training, the largest provider of apprenticeships in the South. City College is currently in the final stages of a £35 million redevelopment project with brand new facilities for engineering, hair, beauty, catering, media, performing arts and technical theatre.

The challenge

When John Savage joined City College Southampton as the new Learning Technologies Manager, his first task was to oversee the migration of the College virtual learning environment (VLE) from Blackboard to Moodle.

As he coordinated training for the new Moodle platform within each department, it became very clear to Savage just how the College VLE (called CityBit2) was being utilised. As he recalls: “The vast majority of staff were using the VLE as a passive repository rather than for creative interactive content…and Moodle works best when users are doing things with it rather than simply retrieving data.”
At the same time, the College was formulating its five-year plan to raise standards. In line with its mantra “Outstanding by 2012”, Savage was asked to develop a method of measuring the quantity and quality of Moodle usage within the City College Southampton.

The activity

An earlier Ofsted inspection gave Savage the idea of using a grading system. “I didn’t want to use the Ofsted grading terminology, as I felt it wasn’t motivating. So we came up with the idea of awarding Gold, Silver and Bronze medals instead. The timing was perfect as the nation was building up to the summer Olympics in Beijing.”

As a result, all courses on the College Moodle have now been graded in one of four categories:

- Bronze – repository content
- Silver – interactive content
- Gold – collaborative content
- In Development – working towards Bronze level

Every Moodle page is tagged with an appropriate Gold, Silver, Bronze or ‘In Development’ icon that is only visible to staff to avoid any stigma.

The implementation of the Gold, Silver and Bronze programme has been influenced by an Ofsted report on VLEs (Virtual learning environments: an evaluation of their development in a sample of education settings) that highlights the lack of institution-wide benchmarking of learning platforms. Based on this report, Savage implemented five phases:

- Set the standards
- Communicate the standards
- Measure the standards
- Drive up achievements
- Provide the support

The benchmarking initiative was communicated to the staff through a series of ‘tongue in cheek’ posters in the College newsletter based on the Olympic Games theme. In the early phase, additional incentives were used. “Initially, tutors that submitted their Moodle work were rewarded with MP3 players in order to identify and consolidate the crucial early adopters,” recalls Savage.
Medal breakdown screen provides a wealth of relevant data

Reports are now taken from the College Moodle and imported into a custom-designed sophisticated spreadsheet which combines several weighted measurements to come up with a final grade. For each course, these metrics include:

- Number of student enrolments
- Student hit rate
- Number and variety of activities
- Weighted algorithms to give sensible results
- Manual moderation (for a very small number of courses)
The outcomes

At the time of writing, the Gold, Silver and Bronze benchmarking system has been in place one full academic year. The table below shows the improvement in grades from 2008 to 2009:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of awards represents approximately one third of all the ‘genuine’ courses on the College learning platform. In order to maintain instant feedback, staff are able to see a tally of all the Gold, Silver and Bronze courses on the whole CityBit2 system online at any time.

Savage is delighted with the way the benchmarking scheme has progressed. “The whole system becomes its own driver. Once tutors receive a Bronze award, they start coming to me asking what they have to do to promote it to Silver or Gold. As a result, we now have a larger proportion of courses that are making the most of Moodle’s sophisticated facilities in the form of interactive and collaborative content that the students find much more engaging.”

In order to further encourage staff to improve their Moodle material, tutors can click a link beneath the Gold, Silver, Bronze or ‘In Development’ logo which provides detailed feedback for that course which is cross-referenced to the Gold, Silver and Bronze criteria. This allows staff to see at a glance what they have to do to progress to the next medal. Additional online assistance is also available at the click of a mouse.

The impact

The spreadsheet used to transform raw Moodle reports into a weighted grading score is quite complex and took around 40 man hours to produce. However, it now allows almost completely automatic grading with only a tiny proportion of courses requiring manual moderation.

Savage does raise the issue of targets: “If your VLE benchmarking scheme is part of an exercise to achieve targets, be very careful just what you count as a ‘genuine’ course. Temporary ‘overnight’ Moodle courses thrown together quickly or those being used as some kind of sandpit will drag your statistics down. Stipulate some minimum requirements - such as a minimum enrolment number - before you allow a course to be included within your benchmarking statistics.”
Additionally Savage advises the following: ensure you have a long lead time; keep staff informed and on board with a good communications strategy; and work with the early adopters first until you achieve a critical mass of success.

As the Gold, Silver and Bronze benchmarking scheme enters its second year, Savage is constantly looking for improvements. His ‘wish list’ includes:

- The possibility of letting students see which grade each course has achieved
- Taking student views into account when awarding a grade
- Focusing support and training on curriculum areas that have not achieved any Gold, Silver or Bronze awards
- Incorporating the progression of ‘in-development’ courses to Bronze level as part of individual staff development plans

For Savage, the two most crucial future developments that will have the biggest impact on the College VLE benchmarking scheme will be the introduction of single log-ons for students and the implementation of a streaming media server. He summarises: “These two initiatives would help enormously by bolstering the scheme at two opposite ends – combining more engaging content with easier access for the students.”

By 2010, the College is looking to achieve 70% of courses in the medals with 10% Gold, 25% Silver and 35% Bronze awards. Only time will tell, but on present form City College Southampton may find its Moodle medal haul puts the GB Olympic Team to shame.
Useful links

City College Southampton
Moodle
Ofsted VLE Report (PDF)

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