South West College
A whole-college approach to online learning and assessment (May 2016)

Summary

In 2013, South West College created a virtual college running synchronously alongside the physical college. Three years later, significant progress has been made towards offering online learning and assessment to learners based at home and abroad.

Organisation

South West College, a merged, multi-campus FE college in Tyrone and Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, has a mission to provide lifelong learning opportunities for learners in the south west of Northern Ireland (NI). Serving a predominantly rural area, around 50% of the college’s enrolments are over 18.

In a global market driven by technical innovation, senior managers at the college recognised that it was possible to provide education and training outside the college’s home region, and began a strategic drive to extend provision through distance learning. A three-year strategy is also underway to increase the proportion of online learning and assessment for learners attending the physical college.

Making it happen

To test the viability of online delivery and assessment across all levels in 20 curriculum areas, senior managers took the bold step of closing the college for one week in November 2011. Teaching staff had from March of that year to research and prepare ways of supporting learning through technology across one week. The college’s virtualisation team provided support.

A top-down initiative led by the college’s head of curriculum and director, the Virtual Week was uncharted territory. However, the response of teaching staff took everyone by surprise. Every curriculum area succeeded in delivering and assessing learning remotely during the Virtual Week, with the exception of the special learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD) department whose learners attended face to face but were introduced to technology-enhanced formative strategies such as quizzes. With 5,655 learners, full time and part time, logging on to the college’s virtual learning environment (VLE) across the week, the college’s aspiration for “flipped learning” had become reality.
The college’s VLE, Blackboard was the most used technology during the Virtual Week, chiefly for access to online resources and for assignment submission, while Blackboard Collaborate provided an online classroom space for synchronous teaching. Quiz and polling facilities were widely used. More innovative approaches included a ‘team teach’ activity for sports studies in a gameshow format. The experience of this was transformative:

“One of the best sessions I’ve seen. They learned in an enjoyable and interactive way, keeping learners of all levels engaged for 1.5 hours remotely, which isn’t easy to do. It amazed me, the amount of learning taking place.”

Ciara Duffy, virtual services manager, South West College

The success of the Virtual Week, and the college’s continuing drive towards online delivery and e-testing, relies on three complementary lines of activity:

» Upskilling staff and learners
» Ensuring technology is fit for purpose
» Quality assurance

Upskilling staff began long before the Virtual Week commenced, but has since become easier as staff understand better the benefits that can be found in technology. The Virtual Week initiative provided the tipping point that changed attitudes to technology in teaching, learning and assessment:

“Staff now come to us asking how to use something someone else is using.”

Ciara Duffy, virtual services manager, South West College

Learners develop skills in online learning with a growing set of short, stand-alone enrichment courses on Blackboard. These range from digital skills, study skills, business skills and e-safety to first aid, health and safety, business Mandarin and employability skills; all conclude with online assessments such as quizzes with online badges as awards. A similar badge scheme exists for the continuing professional development (CPD) of staff.

Quality assurance was (and still remains) a high priority for online or blended programmes as with every other mode of delivery. Each staff member delivering online undertakes an observation by a teaching and learning advisor to enable other teaching staff to learn from their experiences:
“It’s all about the quality of the teaching and the learning experience, not the technology we use”

Ciara Duffy, virtual services manager, South West College

Outcomes

South West College is on course to achieve a proportion of online delivery and assessment on all face-to-face courses; in 2016, the target is 5% of each course delivered online, rising to 7.5% in 2017 and 10% in the following year. Already, this means 34 hours out of a total of 600 guided learning hours for each learner is delivered online.

In 2016, approximately 60% of all college vocational courses are using some form of online assessment, including health and social care, early years, motor vehicle, engineering, construction, plumbing, electrical, hospitality, hairdressing, beauty therapy, sports studies, business, administration and plastering.

The target is for all courses to provide some form of technology-supported summative assessment, whether by e-portfolio or online submission, marking and grade recording via Blackboard. e-Testing and e-portfolio submission via awarding organisations' own systems continue to be used where relevant to the course.

Options for technology-enhanced formative assessment are increasing in parallel. South West College has developed its own app for bite-sized learning with quizzes, and assessments in 3-D and immersive environments are under development. The college, which already employs a learning technologist on each campus, has recently brought in the expertise of graduates in computing and virtual world technologies to move its’ e-learning and e-assessment provision on to the next level. Trials of assessments in virtual worlds and simulations are beginning on courses in construction and computing. South West College have recently launched the first virtual open day and received excellent feedback from learners and employers.

In addition, the college has developed its own bespoke tracking system called Pathway. This currently offers teaching staff a place to create and collate term-time reports, view learner attendance records and record tutorial meetings with learners, but in 2016 a pilot is underway to enable staff to record and track learners’ progress on their courses. Assessments across all 20 curriculum areas are submitted electronically but transfer of data across to other college systems is not yet automated.

Running in parallel is the Virtual College which has commenced delivery and assessment of learning for disadvantaged communities in Zambia, opening up rich international liaison and research opportunities, and increasing the reach of college courses.

Impact

Cross fertilisation of ideas and capabilities shared between the physical and virtual colleges has been an invigorating force for change at South West College. This is evident in assessment and feedback as well as in the delivery of learning. College managers and curriculum staff are enthusiastic about what they have learned and experienced:
“Blended and virtual learning is a key to lifelong learning, a key to countering rural isolation and tackling the associated inequalities that can emerge. The South West College virtual service blossomed in 2012 and has continued to grow year on year.”

Malachy McAleer, chief executive, South West College

Targets for online delivery and assessment have engineered a culture of innovation and collaboration among curriculum teams; there is already less duplication of resources. In addition, teaching staff, external verifiers and learners all report time and workload benefits from being able to submit and mark assignments, provide and receive feedback or verify work off campus.

Badging of short online courses is encouraging teaching staff to pick up new skills to assist them in online delivery; up to 2016, 15,000 digital badges have been awarded to curriculum staff. Their growing expertise means the college is able to move seamlessly into online delivery in the event of bad weather or other extreme circumstances.

NVQs are now entirely assessed online and external verifiers have been happy to accept assessment evidence in digital format, although a few awarding organisations and higher education institutions are slower to accept digital evidence.

Benefits of the technology

» South West College has been able to increase its market share nationally and internationally through the virtual college

» Tracking learner performance is set to be automated, enabling staff to monitor and respond to at-risk learners and the college to move closer towards full electronic management of assessment (EMA) and robust quality assurance processes

» Teachers encouraged to innovate and experiment

» Teachers, verifiers and learners are able to complete tasks online anywhere, any time

» Through their use of technology, learners gain digital skills and confidence, aiding their employability

» Faster turnaround time made possible by online submission and feedback motivates all learners to achieve more; virtual or blended routes to qualifications can be just as supportive to learners as face-to-face teaching
“e-Learning bridges the gap between the teacher and the pupil through technology, I just really enjoy it …it’s really beautiful. It’s the best thing that has ever happened.”
Francis Mutale, South West College overseas learner, 2015

Tips for effective practice

» A strategic approach led by senior managers is essential if a learning provider is to move from small-scale technology-based assessment initiatives to online delivery and electronic management of assessment

» Integrating assessment data with college systems is more challenging in further education colleges offering a wide range of qualifications. Investing in in-house systems can be required to achieve an organisation’s EMA goals

» With these in place, teaching staff and learners gain confidence in using new approaches, especially when there is a whole-college drive towards a technology-enhanced curriculum

Find out more

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