Cornwall College
Putting the ‘OO’ into Moodle (December 2016)

Summary

The Cornwall College Group (also known as Cornwall College) has eight main campuses and several smaller sites across the south west of the UK. In a large, dispersed organisation such as this, the virtual learning environment (VLE) can be an important unifying force. Moodle has been established as Cornwall College’s learning platform for a decade but the e-learning team have had to work hard in recent years to demonstrate the true value of the platform to staff and learners. This case study contains their tips for giving a boost to Moodle.

Organisation

Cornwall College is a very large general further education (FE) college with an annual turnover of £63m and 1,600 staff. Serving 30,000 students across all levels (including higher education and postgraduate), the college offers courses in a wide range of subject areas and is also the largest college provider of apprenticeships in the south west. The college’s digital aims are to harness technology to support a flexible, personalised learning experience for all its learners with real-time progress monitoring for both staff and learners.

The challenge

Moodle is a consistent presence across all courses across Cornwall College, no matter where or how they are delivered. Yet despite the support of champions on each campus, and some areas of excellent practice, not all staff were convinced of the value of Moodle. Many were simply unaware of the improved functionality and usability of recent versions. Putting the shine back into Moodle – and the blended learning it supports – meant investigating end-users’ needs and improving their experience of the platform before its importance to learning and teaching could be fully re-established.
The solution (and how to get there)

Believing that it is not cost effective to support multiple learning systems and tools, Cornwall College's e-learning team made every effort to promote Moodle as the single ‘go-to’ system for all learners and staff. The team took the following sequence of actions to ensure Moodle maintained its role at the heart of learning and teaching at the college:

1. **Finding out what was wrong:** Using focus groups, the team researched the reasons behind negative perceptions of Moodle. These ranged from a single poor experience to a generalised view that Moodle was too difficult or too dull to use. Finding time to get familiar with its layout was another reason for non-engagement. For some staff, there was also an underlying fear that online learning could spell the end of face-to-face teaching.

2. **Increasing knowledge:** Learner participants in the focus groups were keener to use Moodle but like many staff were often unaware of what the platform could offer – for example, electronic assignment submission (already possible in Moodle) was a common request.

3. **Improving the experience:** From the feedback they received, the e-learning team recognised that perceptions of Moodle would not improve without a change to the look and feel of the learning platform. There were some valid points raised in the focus group feedback for which solutions had to be found. The outcomes of their research, and consequent actions, are as follows:

   - **Screen size:** Users wanted learning resources to be accessible from devices with markedly different screen sizes. Anything from mobiles and tablets to wall-mounted, dual-purpose TV screens could be in the frame. Could Moodle be viewed successfully on all types and size of screen? The solution adopted by the e-learning team was to employ the **Moodle theme based on Bootstrap** which optimises the view according to the user’s needs.

   - **Navigation:** Some users found it difficult to navigate their way to the right course. Using Moodle **Dashboard** the e-learning team were able to amend the screen layout to make it easier to pick the right course from other available options, and to make the end-user’s experience more personalised.

   - **Accessing resources:** Once logged in, users were often faced with uninspiring lists of resources and no way of working out which to use, and when. This common complaint from Moodle users was resolved by arranging resources in a week-by-week grid layout which is more familiar to today’s app and internet users, as shown below:
4. **Improving familiarity:** No matter what level, course or campus, every enrolled 16-19 student at the Cornwall College Group follows a core enrichment programme including maths and English at level 2 (if not already achieved), employability, e-safety and core personal skills development. Resources to support these elements of the curriculum are located on Moodle so that all learners become familiar with the platform. Comprising a number of ready-made resources, the enrichment programme has demonstrated to staff that a VLE can reduce rather than increase their workload; continuing professional development (CPD) units on Moodle have also helped to establish the central role of Moodle for staff users.

5. **Increasing interactivity:** Good channels of communication with staff and learners enable the e-learning team to identify where external resources could add value to the college’s Moodle site. Embedding rather than linking to these resources has the added advantage of keeping users within the same environment. Recommendations from Cornwall College include **Emaze** to enliven presentations and **H5P** for a richer, more interactive videos, presentations, games and quizzes. Using a video server, short videos can also be embedded and streamed in Moodle, avoiding the necessity of uploading and downloading video content.

6. **Making the most of plugins:** Plugins can be added to Moodle to further increase its functionality. Examples added by Cornwall College include a **Checklist** tool to support progress monitoring and review, and the tab topics and **Grid formats**. When selecting plugins, however, it is important to check they will continue to be supported to safeguard use over the long term.

7. **Showcasing positive examples:** One-to-one, problem-solution conversations with course teams and individuals have undoubtedly produced the best outcomes for Cornwall College’s e-learning team. Making it possible for staff to ask for what they need was a core part of their approach. However, as one-to-ones are time-consuming, the e-learning team have showcased examples of good practice to the wider college community and used effective models in whole-college implementations to disseminate more widely how Moodle can adapt to users’ needs.

8. **Seizing the moment:** Opportunities to highlight what Moodle can do often occur coincidentally. In fact, Cornwall College’s e-learning team have found that chance conversations were often the most fruitful opportunities to promote Moodle; members of staff mentioning in passing, “Wouldn’t it be good if..” would trigger research into what was possible. Examples of discoveries prompted by chance
interventions include making content mobile friendly in Moodle Books, adding activities into Moodle Lessons and smart use of Moodle Glossaries to help students with their projects. Adapting the Choice tool to produce a personalised staff training timetable has also demonstrated the organisational potential of Moodle.

9. Getting Moodle out there: Finally, the college’s e-learning team took every opportunity to bring Moodle to the forefront of cross-college events to show how it can respond (or be made responsive) to users’ everyday needs. Even early adopters, they say, can become limited in their use of a VLE and, as a consequence, lose their passion for it over time. As a result, it is important to keep established users enthusiastic by raising awareness of what can be achieved with the latest versions.

Outcomes

Cornwall College’s e-learning team recognise that not all users in a large organisation will become passionate Moodle advocates. The growing trend towards external, web-based tools taking over from institutionally owned VLEs is hard to counter. Nonetheless, they have proved that the more you enable users to ask for solutions, the more value they find in this ready-to-hand, familiar and often undervalued tool:

“The more you showcase, the more people will engage.”
Rebecca Barrington, head of e-learning and innovation, The Cornwall College Group

Tips for effective practice

- Create opportunities for conversations about Moodle. These can be about problems, needs and disappointments as well as successes
- Make sure Moodle is at the heart of what learners and teachers do so that using it is an everyday experience
- To win round less committed staff, help them to discover what is already on Moodle that can reduce their workload
- Invite requests for additional functionality, and demonstrate how Moodle can respond
- Create teams of advocates on different campuses so that effective models of use can be cascaded more readily
- Showcase best practice widely across the organisation to ensure all users understand what can be achieved
- Recognise that there are some things Moodle does not do well, but also that it can be more responsive to the changing needs of users than is often realised
“To get people to engage with Moodle, you need to instil passion and enthusiasm for the possibilities it offers. Discovering what can be done to solve everyday problems often puts the ‘OO’ back into people’s reactions to Moodle.”

Rebecca Barrington, head of e-learning and innovation, The Cornwall College Group

Find out more

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