Borders College

Working collaboratively to develop innovative solutions (April 2016)

Summary

Borders College is taking an innovative approach to supporting the delivery of learning to students who are spread out across a wide geographical area. Collaboration with other institutions and with a major industry partner, and a rigorous approach to procurement, are driving development of strong services for all students and rapid adoption of digital technologies to improve teaching, learning and the student experience.

The challenge

Borders College, situated in Galashiels in the Scottish borders, has approximately 5,500 students studying on a range of vocational programmes including hairdressing, construction, sports science and motor vehicle repair as well as a host of rural practices such as game-keeping, ploughing and animal husbandry. A large proportion of learners spend much of their time working away from teaching staff in remote locations where broadband coverage and mobile phone reception are poor or non-existent; the college faces real challenges in achieving its goal of developing leading-edge digital services for its learners.

The solution

Despite the college’s relatively small size, it has established a large team of 16 in its ILT department. The team takes on the task of identifying and implementing technologies that will support the college’s particular teaching and learning priorities and also reduce administration so that teachers’ time is freed up to focus on teaching and assessment. Fraser Wight, the college’s technology-enhanced learning lead, says his team’s approach is to start from a detailed understanding of what teachers want to achieve:
“First we find out what the teaching and learning objectives are and if there are any barriers to achieving them, then we go out and find the kit or the tool to support delivery.”

Fraser Wight, technology enhanced learning lead, Borders College

Borders College has set up an innovation hub and sought out an industry partner – Fujitsu. It supports students and staff alike, and support staff from Fujitsu visit regularly to advise and provide information on using technology to teach and learn. Borders is the first FE college in Scotland to have the equipment in its innovation hub sponsored by the company under the Fujitsu Education Ambassador Programme, set up to promote collaboration between colleges and share best practice in the use of technology. Initially located in a single room for use by college students and staff, the hub is being expanded and opened up for use by the wider community as the college builds links with schools, universities and other colleges. The partnership with Fujitsu is enabling Borders College to be among the first to try out emerging technologies in an education setting. Recently, they have been testing a way for learners to scan text on a whiteboard via a QR code and send what is written on the board in pen direct to their phones.

At the same time, a co-operative partnership with Heriot-Watt University is bringing benefits for learners at both institutions. Both use Moodle as their virtual learning environment (VLE) and Borders College provides IT support to help the university maintain its Moodle site while Heriot-Watt reciprocates by providing access to their library services for college students. Fraser says that this has enabled the college to “place the library at the core of everything we do.”

The college aims to create ‘a library in your pocket’ for every learner. This is a work in progress because broadband coverage and mobile phone reception are still poor on some of the local farmland and rural estates, but progress is being made.

The quest to find the right tool for the particular learning objective has led the IT team to invest in walky-talkies to support sports coaching and GoPro action cameras to help teachers learn how to improve their delivery – students are filming some of their classes so staff can get a learners’-eye view of how they come across. The college is committed to providing appropriate devices when necessary and students have been keen to work with the new technologies so there is strong demand for this. Potentially, this could require a significant financial investment but this is where procurement skills come to the fore:

“I’m very, very demanding when it comes to procurement; I’ve learned that it’s usually possible to cut costs to a fraction of the initial quote and I never give up. I’ve done
talks and given mentoring to help other institutions do the same.”
Fraser Wight, technology enhanced learning lead, Borders College

New technology is often what grabs people’s attention, but improvements are also being made in other areas to enhance students’ experience of digital. The library and other learning spaces, for example, are being made more flexible by removing fixed desktops and supporting more use of mobile devices and the creation of blended learning rooms is offering better facilities for collaborative working.

The IT team’s close working relationship with teaching staff has earned it their trust. Digital solutions tend, therefore, to be adopted readily and ongoing staff training, including ‘bite-size’ sessions, makes sure that people have the skills and confidence to make the most of new possibilities. Experiments continue into the best way to provide formal recognition for new skills and knowledge gained – open badges such as Snook may be the answer.

Impact

- Partnerships with other institutions and industry are helping to deliver stronger services for learners as well as business efficiencies
- Offering different ways to access learning resources means remote learners are able to access these anywhere, and at any time
- Teaching staff are freed up to maximise their student contact time through the support of the college’s technology enhanced learning developers, who are responsible for developing learning materials within their faculties
- Teaching staff are developing their digital skills through supported experimentation with different technologies
- The college is transforming learning spaces by making them more flexible so that it can make optimal use of them

Key points

Fraser Wight’s tips for using technology to enhance learners’ digital experience:
- Make sure you understand the teaching and learning objectives so you can find the most appropriate technology solution
• Have good communicators within your technology team so they can work with teachers and win their trust

• Show people how technology will make things better - or they won’t use it

• Work with your finance/procurement team to ensure best value for money when purchasing technology

More information

Contact: Fraser Wight, technology-enhanced learning lead, Borders College
Email: fwright@borderscollege.ac.uk
Web: www.borderscollege.ac.uk
Read more about the college’s Innovation hub