Doncaster College and University Centre
My SOLE – a tutorial programme for the digital age (June 2018)

Summary

A year after Doncaster College and University Centre’s academic services took over development of the college’s online tutorial programme, My SOLE, they took the decision to switch platforms from the college’s VLE, Blackboard, to Google’s G Suite.

With trials of G Suite taking place elsewhere in the college, and with cloud computing for consumer services almost ubiquitous in the outside world, the team became convinced it was time to adopt a platform that was familiar to learners in order to improve engagement with the tutorial programme.

This case study outlines the process the team went through to change from a VLE to a cloud-based platform, and the benefits they have experienced since making the switch.

Organisation

Doncaster College and University Centre is a large provider of further and higher education in south Yorkshire. Offering a wide range of education and training courses on a town-centre campus, the college is well placed to support the wide-ranging vocational and academic needs of the area’s 16-19 year-olds.

Responsiveness to the changing environment, needs and ambitions of its communities is a key priority for the college. Doncaster serves areas with among the highest indices of social and economic deprivation, and includes among its objectives ensuring access to learning in ways that are appropriate to learners’ needs.
The challenge

Rated good in all areas by Ofsted in 2016, Doncaster College was especially praised for its work on the My SOLE tutorial programme. However, not all learners were accessing the tutorial modules. More needed to be done to improve take-up and to increase completion rates; part of the solution to that problem was to align better with learners' preferences and habits in the use of digital technology.

Initially working with Blackboard, the first issue the team had to resolve was the large number of learners – around 3000 – who would be accessing the modules. As the programme was to support all learners on courses from entry level 3 to level 3, it would involve the largest number of users ever accessing a single course on Blackboard at the college. Solving this meant creating 22 master classes on the VLE.

Since then, the multi-disciplinary team has continued to rise to challenges created by a fast-changing digital and cultural environment.

A significant challenge came in the form of cuts to face-to-face tutorial hours which meant My SOLE modules would be more frequently used by learners working independently. Mobile access became a priority. Another far-reaching development was the growing preference among members of both the welfare and academic services teams for the cloud-based platform, Google Classroom.

With trials of G Suite (including Classroom) taking place in various academic and support areas of the college, the academic services team became convinced that it was time to change platforms. The pilot was managed by the team themselves, which meant that they were ideally placed to see first-hand the functionality G Suite afforded and how it might be developed further to deliver the tutorial programme. Nonetheless it was not an easy transition to make.

Sarah Crossland, academic services manager, explains:

“At first, moving away from Blackboard felt like a leap of faith, but we knew it made sense as staff were switching to G Suite for their teaching. Working with G Suite is a very different experience to using a VLE – it might confuse at first if you are only used to working within the rigid structure of a VLE, but it offers many more ways of designing learning.”

Sarah Crossland, academic services manager, Doncaster College and University Centre
Benefits

Having established that G Suite offered a more user-friendly platform, and translated well to a variety of mobile and hand-held devices, it made sense for the tutorial programme to follow the growing trend. In addition, it would increase opportunities for collaborative learning and enable users to develop digital skills they would need in other aspects of their lives.

“We felt we had come to the end of the road with Blackboard. We needed a more engaging way of getting the content out to learners, so we looked for an approach that fitted seamlessly into their lives. Enabling us all to update our digital literacy skills by working in a cloud-based environment was an extra bonus.”

Sarah Crossland

An additional benefit from the transfer has been the expertise the academic services team has built up in content creation in G Suite. This valuable experience can be transferred to other aspects of college provision – examples under consideration include online modules for staff development and core content for apprentices in engineering and manufacturing.

Outcomes

In 2018, My SOLE, now entirely created and hosted in G Suite, contains a core of 10 compulsory modules under the heading of my values. Each has four levels ranging from entry level 3 to level 3. Accessible only to enrolled learners via a single login, these are:

- Anti-bullying
- British parliament
- British values
- Doncaster College citizens
- Doncaster community
- Equality Act 2010
- Finance
- Healthy relationships
- Prevent
- Religion
Each of the core modules is assessed by a quiz administered by a member of the academic services team. Using Google Sheet add-ons, the team has created a master template to generate electronic certificates on the achievement of a pass percentage. Learners store these in their Google Drive, building up evidence of their progress and achievement.

From there, learners ‘pick ‘n’ mix’ their own choice of content. The non-compulsory modules are also offered at different levels and are assessed in the same way as the core modules, with certificates of achievement available to those achieving the right percentage.

These modules cover cultural topics, study support, academic writing, financial know-how, referencing, 21st century skills, maths and English skills.

All My SOLE modules are produced in house using combinations of home-grown and found resources such as videos, audio clips, Padlets and word search games. Still within the Google environment, a pilot is underway in 2018 using Google docs to develop an optional reflective journal.

Getting it right

Creating content means being especially alert to users’ feedback. Despite being time consuming, this can have benefits. By liaising with staff from the welfare team, the student progress and performance tutors (SPPTs) and learners throughout module production, the academic services team have been able to make adjustments more quickly than would have been possible with a commercial product.

With the help of the SPPTs, the content of each module is also readily kept up to date, and even made locally relevant – another advantage that home produced content has over off-the-shelf versions.

Tips

• Keeping abreast of changing digital habits and needs is a priority for providers in a digital age

• Providers can reduce their carbon footprint and reduce expenditure by moving to cloud providers. When doing so, it is important to check the quality of internet connections, as usage at scale will require reliability, speed and high security.

• In-house content creation requires a well-coordinated multi-disciplinary team. Doncaster’s academic services team comprises a wide skillset from information specialists and librarians, to learning technologists, web designers and database managers. In addition, the team has benefited from engaging a level 3 apprentice in creative and digital media
Despite this, the skills acquired from creating and administering an in-house online programme can be transferred to other aspects of college provision to generate efficiency gains. While content creation is time-consuming, it also means that resources can be more easily adapted and updated.

Find out more

Email: sarah.crossland@don.ac.uk
Read about: Jisc's support for providers adopting G Suite here.