The Isle of Wight College

Supporting transformation: a digital environment that works for all (January 2017)

Summary

In response to a fast-changing business environment, the Isle of Wight College made the move in 2015 from college-based systems and servers to the cloud-based Microsoft® **Office 365®** service backed up ELEARNING FORCE™'s **LMS365**® learning management system.

The change has enabled the college to make significant strides towards achieving its FELTAG goals. Web-based, familiar and seamless from a user's perspective, the suite of tools in the 365 wrapper has made it easier for teachers to innovate and for today's digitally connected learners to study online, unconstrained by time or place.

There have also been efficiency gains. Integrated dashboard facilities are enabling managers and course leaders to see at a glance how attendance and achievement are shaping up in real time, while reduced expenditure on infrastructure, training and IT support have cut running costs. Improved grades in the childhood studies department in 2016 suggest the infrastructure – and the model of teaching and learning it facilitates – work better for learners too.

Organisation

The Isle of Wight College, established in 1951 and based in Newport on the Isle of Wight, is a general further education college of around 6000 learners focusing on vocational provision and apprenticeships. A 12-million-pound investment in a centre of excellence for the composites, engineering, advanced manufacture and marine industries demonstrates the college's commitment to serving the employment needs of the island. The college was given Beacon College status for excellence and innovation in education, and was graded 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2007.

The challenge

In recent years, the Isle of Wight College has made changes to keep pace with trends. In 2015, with budget cuts and government policy moving in favour of apprenticeships, the college closed its sixth form centre to focus on

STEM and vocational provision. Fast, anytime, anywhere access to high-quality learning materials became a priority.

A review of the college's ICT infrastructure and ILT usage suggested further change of direction was needed. A more vigorously applied BYOD policy combined with improved network coverage would give learners and staff more immediate access to all they needed to know, or do, anywhere on the campus. With these changes in place, the way was open for a web-based digital learning environment to provide the same high-quality learning experience in any location. Learners could then make better use of ILT resources, enabling learning in and out of the classroom to be more closely aligned with the college's FELTAG goals.

There were challenges in changing something so fundamental to college life. Moodle was established as the college virtual learning environment (VLE) and a number of departments had well-developed Moodle sites. However, staff were already using a wide array of web-based tools, including Office 365, on a variety of devices, making IT support increasingly difficult. What was needed was a uniform, high-quality learning environment that worked for all.

The solution

On the technical front

In 2015 - 2016, the college adopted **Office 365 Education** – a suite of tools free to educational users which includes the familiar Microsoft package of Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint, plus Sway for interactive presentations, OneNote for capturing ideas and OneDrive for sharing content. Working over the web on Android, iOS, or Windows devices, Office 365 gives staff and learners a level playing field. It also removes the need for costly server maintenance and bespoke software training.

With the addition of LMS365, the college has a SCORM-compliant learning management system that works seamlessly with Office 365. As a result, staff have continuity of access to the SCORM-driven learning resources developed by **City and Guilds** and the Heart of Worcestershire College's **Blended Learning Consortium,** many of which have been embedded in college courses.

LMS365 also includes course and module creation tools which the college's ICT team describe as 'simplicity itself' to use. Course creator enables teachers to pull together new courses or modify existing ones by defining modules and types of activity, linking into Office 365's collaborative features when required. The range of options at their disposal prompts teachers to think more widely than simply 'paper on screen' when creating a course – blogs, discussion forums, wikis and newsfeeds are all available as options. A course catalogue helps learners navigate to the right place on the system.

The module builder tool then gets to the heart of learning design. A structure made up of interactive resources created by the teacher – for example, PowerPoint Mix or Sway presentations, SCORM-compliant resources from other sources, YouTube videos or other web-based content – creates a sequence of steps for learners to work

through. Quizzes build in check points before the next step is commenced, enabling the pace of learning to be controlled by the learner.

With web access in any location, learning delivered in this way can form part of a face-to-face class, preparation or extension activities in advance of a class, or be offered as a standalone distance learning package. The experience of learning online is seamless. From the user's perspective, Office 365 and its associated learning management system are one and the same; the interface is consistent throughout with elements appearing in the same place on the screen at all levels, and the integration between the two means that users do not have to 'step outside' for other functions – for example, to review individual or group attendance or attainment on a course. Dashboard displays are available immediately to college managers and course leaders as well as individual staff members and learners, helping to embed a culture of continuous monitoring and self-improvement.

Winning hearts and minds

Despite some clear gains for the organisation, it was not always easy to convince staff that the change of platform would benefit them. Not all Isle of Wight staff were Microsoft devotees, and those who had 'just got their heads around' Moodle were concerned about the time and effort needed to adapt to a new system. The switch was made easier when content already on Moodle was moved over without technical hitches. Staff support needs were nonetheless high throughout 2015-2016:

"Staff go through pain when you change something familiar that they have invested in. You have to be prepared to support them fully as they make that change and play to their strengths. But now, there are no learning programmes in the college that do not have a digital presence. And most have developed more ILT resources than they would have done on Moodle."

Lynne Christopher, deputy principal, The Isle of Wight College

Similarly, the college's BYOD policy did not change everything overnight. Learners initially needed to be reminded at all times to take responsibility for their learning, while a small proportion did not have tablets, laptops or smartphones of their own. The college has provided a laptop hire facility to support this category of learners – the length of hire is restricted to ensure those who forget to bring their own device do not disadvantage others. Learners can also purchase devices from an online shop.

Showing the way

Already experienced in task-based learning, the first department to pilot the new platform was childhood studies, which had opted in 2015 to adopt a blended learning model for its 120 full-time learners and 300+ part-time learners. The department was also keen to monitor how learners managed their newly timetabled independent learning hours in the department's refurbished, Wi-Fi-enabled Learning Zone.

The outcomes of the pilot reveal the factors which were instrumental in making the transition to blended learning successful in this department:

- LMS365 was key to the success of the pilot. With an intuitive interface and easy-to-use tools for creating content such as quizzes, blogs and wikis, the platform enabled staff to move more readily from traditional, taught classes to 'flipping the classroom'– a mode of learning in which learners complete activities in their own time before coming into class. Once learning objectives and targets are established in the timetabled classes, weekly learning plans identify the activities learners are to complete in their independent learning hours.

- CPD sessions on a departmental basis have helped staff take up the challenge of creating the blended learning content learners need to have access to in order to study independently. With time freed up from the reduction in support requests, the IT team were able to offer guidance in using the new tools in weekly sessions during the first year of the trial. These sessions ran in parallel with the pilot to enable staff to keep their learners busy, focused and engaged during the 54 hours of timetabled independent study over the year.

- Tracking proved to be another key requirement when managing a more mobile, flexible model of learning. To check and record the progress of learners, and enable them to monitor their own progress against deadlines, the LMS365 environment offers progress tracking, assignment management and grade book tools; in addition, the college uses **Smart Assessor** for apprentices and **eTrackr**[ILP] to support all learners' general welfare and progress.

- The physical learning environment can play an equally important part in the success of campus-based blended learning. The childhood studies department's Learning Zone, a suite of informal learning areas and classrooms opened in September 2016, and placed a marker in the sand. Classrooms still had their place, but learners using their own devices for study were better served by a more informal and varied room layout:

"We watched how and where learners arranged themselves when using their laptops and tablets. There was often a tendency to sit together in a comfortable corner around a low table, particularly at

the start of an assignment. Others lay on the ground. When an assignment was due, they looked for a quieter area so they weren't distracted. Their behaviour was the driver behind the design of the Learning Zone."

Jo Lutas, head of childhood studies, The Isle of Wight College

As a result of these observations, the department's Learning Zone has three distinct areas: the Hub where comfy sofas and low level tables facilitate learning with laptops, the Buzz Zone, where noisier discussion and group work take place, and the Quiet Zone where learners work individually on research or assignment production. The space is not restricted to learners; teachers using laptops provided by the college offer support and guidance when needed. The atmosphere is busy and productive; a variety of seating – bean bags, sofas and even an artificial grass area –support different types of activity and modes of learning.

Outcomes

- Using LMS365 to the full has enabled childhood studies learners to exploit their own understanding of, and familiarity with, digital technology for learning, as recommended by FELTAG. The outcomes are promising; in 2016, grades improved on level 3 courses in the department

- Learners feel well supported whether working alone or in groups. Using OneDrive, they can collaborate with others in real time; with quizzes, they can test their understanding of conceptual learning and refresh their knowledge as they approach an assessment, while a personalised desktop presents their most recently used files each time they log in to keep them on track

- The increase in independent learning hours and corresponding provision of informal physical learning spaces are much valued. 76% of learners bring their own devices into the Learning Zone to study, and many find the relaxed atmosphere has improved their concentration:

"This is so much better than doing everything in a classroom." "It encourages me to do my work more because

it is a friendly atmosphere." "Because it is comfy, it doesn't put me off working in my own time."

Childhood studies learners, The Isle of Wight College

- Other departments, including construction, have begun the process of creating their own learning zone and blended learning model of delivery supported by LMS365

- College-wide use of ILT resources has increased. Sign-ons to the 365 system rose from 125,000 to 226,000 in a year, a result the ICT team attributes to the simplicity and familiarity of the system

- Teachers are taking up the challenge of building courses and creating more varied, engaging learning activities for their learners. There is no course that has not yet created a digital presence on LMS365

- Staff feel empowered by their growing command of technology and the insight they have gained into the digital world of their learners:

"I feel as if I have been able to enter my students' world."

Rona Quinn, childhood studies lecturer, The Isle of Wight College

Benefits of the technology

- Free cloud-based suite of software with five copies of the latest desktop version of Microsoft Office per educational user

- Workable on any device

- OneTB storage and 50GB per inbox user

- Easily integrated with institutional single sign-on and identity management

- Reduction in training needs and savings of £50,000 on infrastructure and staffing costs over five years

- A personalised desktop – all enrolled learners have access to the same high-quality learning environment with an individual feel

- Easy-to-use tools for resource and course production inspire creativity

- Potential for growth in enrolments from distance learning packages designed in house on LMS365

Tips for effective practice

"Choose a learning management system that learners and staff feel at ease with. Technology has to work first time and feel comfortable. Only then will your staff move from partial buy-in to full take-up. Also recognise that different curriculum areas will do it in different ways; one size does not fit all. Ownership is vital if an infrastructure initiative is to succeed."

Pete Gallop, head of ICT and LRC, The Isle of Wight College

Find out more

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