

Belfast Metropolitan College

Laying the foundations for college-wide blended learning (January 2017)

Summary

Belfast Metropolitan College is committed to enhancing the attainment and employability of its learners by ensuring the most effective use of digital technology in teaching and learning. To this end, the college's centre for excellence (CfE) has a team dedicated to advancing technology-enhanced learning (TEL) across the college. Its role in 2016 has included producing the organisation's TEL framework, advising on procurement, delivering training for staff and assisting departments in developing exemplars of blended learning.

Embedded in the TEL framework is the strategy for blended learning. To turn the college's strategic aspirations for blended learning into reality in 2017– 2019, the TEL team has started the process of procuring a new learning management system (LMS) and rolling out a programme of competence-based training for over 600 academic staff.

Organisation

Belfast Metropolitan College, with five campuses, 30,000 enrolments a year, is the largest further (FE) and higher education (HE) in Northern Ireland. With a history dating back to the early part of the twentieth century, the college offers a wide range of vocational and academic qualifications, from entry level 1 to degree courses. Its catchment area is primarily the city of Belfast but its technology-supported courses are increasingly attracting learners from further afield.

The challenge

Difficult-to-use learning platforms can prove a stumbling block for many teachers new to blended learning and the difficulties are compounded when the platform does not provide easy, seamless access to interactive tools

that inspire creativity. Getting up close and personal with the learning platform and using its functionality to the full still remains a challenge for some staff. As a result, online blended learning content is sometimes little more than 'paper-on-screen.'

Before 2016, courses on Blackboard 9.1 at Belfast Metropolitan followed this trend. Content tended to be static and text-dominated; staff were making little use of the growing range of third-party applications that can bring learning to life. Without a framework for technology-enhanced learning, curriculum and IT staff had not fully collaborated over the procurement of IT systems, and understanding of how systems and tools can enhance learning was correspondingly poor. The TEL team felt they had no option but to seek an alternative, more intuitive learning management system (LMS) backed up by a clear strategic purpose to revitalise blended learning at the college:

"When tendering for a new LMS, our key requirement is for an intuitive system that really enables staff to bring learning alive, which is what blended learning is all about. An interactive, intuitive system will advance our ability to develop blended learning for courses right across the college."

Stephen Kennedy, technology-enhanced learning manager, Belfast Metropolitan College

The solution

In summary

The TEL team took a carefully structured, multi-strand approach to resolving the issues that were holding back blended learning at Belfast Metropolitan College. The sequence of actions was as follows:

- a) Writing the college's TEL framework and blended learning strategy raised the profile of technology as an aid for learning for teachers, support staff and managers. The strategies highlighted the need for more intuitive systems to improve the e-competence and e-confidence of staff
- b) Senior managers agreed the TEL framework (which endorsed the procurement of a new LMS) in October 2016
- c) Mandatory competence-based training sessions throughout 2016 enable staff to acquire and demonstrate their ability to use the core systems, backed up by optional training sessions for third-party applications

- d) On completion of the training sessions, TEL staff work with departments to develop exemplars for individual departments
- e) Rubrics and templates built into the blended learning strategy enable staff to evaluate the content they create

In detail

The first task for the TEL team was to write the framework that would introduce blended learning on all courses and ensure the procurement of an LMS that would better suit the wide-ranging needs of staff. With the framework signed off in October 2016, the TEL team had the ring-fenced funding to procure a new system and the jurisdiction to arrange monthly meetings with the director of curriculum and head of IT to discuss the best type of resource to purchase. Once the new LMS is in place in 2017, the blended learning strategy will come into force.

In place since 2016, however, is the rolling programme of training delivered by the TEL team. All staff have one afternoon a week free to enable them to book sessions in the CfE. Some are mandatory – for example, all staff are required to demonstrate competence in use of the LMS, the wider components of the virtual learning environment (VLE), interactive whiteboards and, if involved in work-based learning or vocational courses, City and Guilds' Learning Assistant e-portfolio system. Optional sessions boost competence with some of the more widely used third-party applications, which includes Microsoft® **OneNote Class Notebook**®, a free add-in for Microsoft 365 which currently provides the wider VLE functionality at Belfast Metropolitan alongside Blackboard. Staff book for sessions online (via **SharePoint**®) after completing a survey to assess their competence. A feedback form at the close of the session establishes how far their competence has improved after the session. With competence demonstrated, attendees are awarded certificates.

The TEL team have found that staff come to a better understanding of what blended learning means while training to use the tools. Through experience, they can also see how systems fit together and the benefits that ensue:

"Our LMS sits at the heart of our VLE. Currently it's Blackboard 9.1 but that will change soon. The wider VLE is driven by 365 using SharePoint. This means any learner or teacher can access content on the VLE anywhere with a single sign-on on any device."

Stephen Kennedy, technology-enhanced learning manager, Belfast Metropolitan College

Their improved understanding supports the next stage of the process when members of the TEL team work with nominated staff in each of the college's five departments to develop exemplars appropriate to each curricular context. The blended learning strategy includes rubrics to help the staff creating blended learning content to

assess the quality of their work. Quality assurance staff working within the CfE also monitor take up of the courses and, on occasions, use of particular tools.

Outcomes

The TEL and blended learning strategies are ready to action once the new LMS is purchased. In the meantime, the college's central TEL unit is undertaking a coherent programme of staff training that is easily accessed by staff. The schedule of sessions is on the college's SharePoint® intranet and staff book via the same platform. Line managers approve each booking so evidence of take up is traceable by department, an automated process which makes it easier for the TEL team to tailor training sessions and to ensure competence is spread evenly across all departments.

Despite there being still some distance to travel to full capability across this large organisation, the means to achieve that goal is in place. The number of bookings already made independently by staff is high, indicating their willingness to take up the challenge of blended learning.

Benefits of the technology

- Content and tools on Microsoft Office 365 are accessible on any device with a single sign-on
- Combined with Microsoft SharePoint, the organisation has a customisable platform that includes tools to build courses, create content and add interactivity as well as complete administrative functions
- Adding on third-party tools widens the potential to inspire learners with engaging blended learning content
- An intuitive, seamless learning management system will help staff make an easier transition into blended learning
- Using the capacity of those tools to the full enables managers and support staff to monitor the competence levels of staff – important when the strategic intent is for an element of blended or online delivery on all courses

Tips for effective practice

- A large infrastructure and staff training initiative requires effective project management. Adopting a proven methodology at the outset can be key to the eventual success of such a project
- Regular meetings between heads of IT, blended learning support teams and curriculum leaders helps ensure that the systems procured meet teaching and learning goals

- Providing tools that are easy for staff to work with enables the organisation to reach its digital goals faster

Find out more

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