

JISC infoNet Award for Innovation in Records and Information Management

Redbridge College – The Personal Learning Plan

Redbridge College required an improved system for tracking and managing learner progress, one to one tutorials and mentoring.

Introduction

We were aware of the common pitfalls of paper-based versions (i.e. filed and left, or even lost; uncoordinated; duplication of data, etc.) and wanted to develop an electronic version that could work effectively with our other systems, particularly our VLE. A project team was established to investigate possibilities and, after an initial consultation with another college, had introduced a wiki-based system. This quickly proved unsatisfactory, primarily as it was quite difficult to introduce to staff (relatively intensive on skills and labour and not ideal with an inexperienced staff group who lack confidence). I was appointed e-Learning Manager in October 2006, inheriting this system and, although I managed to improve the system to its limit, it still lacked the necessary flexibility and it remained non user-friendly. My assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this system was confirmed when, in January 2007, an Ofsted inspection highlighted the following:

“Tutors build good communications and relations with their students whose personal development and academic progress are recorded through individual learning plans. Not all tutors use these often or well enough. The college has developed in some areas the capacity for these plans to be written on-line and some students, for example in music, have responded enthusiastically to the interactive opportunities this presents.”

“An electronic version of the plan has recently been introduced but tutors are often unable to gain access to it. Consequently, many plans are incomplete and are rarely used with students in lessons. The setting of targets with individual students is weak.”

“In work-based learning, individual learning plans are detailed”

A new Approach

I decided to write a detailed specification for the development of a brand new system despite not having the expertise for such a development in-house. We approached the University of London Computer Centre who hosts our Moodle Virtual Learning Environment and asked whether they would take on such a commission. They readily accepted as they had access to some previous similar work started at Barking College. This enabled us to adopt a collaborative approach and, being Open Source, would have the additional benefit of being made widely available to the education community for free download and use.

Redbridge College first adopted a Moodle VLE hosted by the University of London Computer Centre (ULCC) in the summer of 2006. One of the drivers for this was to introduce an electronic Individual Learning Plan to try to avoid some of the pitfalls of the paper based version. Using paper resulted in duplication of hand-written evidence that was difficult to update and the whole process proved difficult to audit in terms of quality and compliance.

Another main advantage of introducing an electronic version was the fact that all tutors and teachers of a course would have access to it and be able to contribute. This would be much more valuable to the learner as they would get better feedback on their progress and would get targets from across the subjects or areas that they were studying.

The college has a small team of Learning Mentors, one for each school, who are available to support learners. They are also involved in chasing up poor attendance, lateness and in the paper-based learner amber/red warning system for monitoring concerns about individual learner's behaviour. The paper based system was less accessible to the Learning Mentors who found it difficult to liaise with the many course teams to track progress and identify individual support requirements. The same was true of the concerns and warning system as often the paperwork was not completed or forwarded to all interested parties.

The first incarnation of the Personal Learning Plan (PLP), as it was dubbed, used the MS Word version of the paper PLP which was pasted in to "Learner Wikis" within each Moodle course. This approach did not take into account the additional code generated when pasting from Word, even when the Word Document was truncated. The courses were created from an MIS generated flat file uploaded to the hosted Moodle site. This had the desired outcome of creating courses, tutors and learners – all with the correct enrolments. However, owing to the fluid nature of FE, these very soon became out-of-date; for example late starters, staff changes, courses being split into groups etc. The busy MIS department were not able to make frequent data updates which meant many manual adjustments were necessary; resulting in frustration and delay to users.

These experiences did prove the system would be of great benefit if it could be better implemented to ensure all tutors had appropriate access and it was both reliable and resilient. I drew up a comprehensive specification and presented it to ULCC for discussion, agreement and implementation. The first stage was to review the current activities in one-to-one tutorials, the aims and expected outcomes. I then looked at the processes involved in gathering informative data to make the learner progress reviews meaningful and to ensure realistic targets were set and monitored. I spoke with personal tutors and Learning Mentors to ascertain their roles in the process and to ensure the system would meet their needs.

Finally, a review of what were essentials and what would be in the wish list of additional features was drawn up in conjunction with the stakeholders and key managers. Working with the MIS team I mapped the data that would be required –initial diagnostic results, attendance and punctuality data (from the register system), photographs and essential MIS data to be transferred to the user profiles in Moodle. An example of the latter was mobile phone numbers as there is a plan to use an SMS tool later in the year. This allowed me to draw up schematics indicating content, sources of data and general look/feel and navigation.

ULCC proceeded to develop a new PLP tool with built in concerns and warning system and included a specific target setting function. Targets can be set by teachers or learners and there is a process to change their status to "completed". One of the new features was to include a specific method and prompt for learners to feed-back on tutors comments and to set their own targets, thus developing their ownership of their own learning and development.

The next step was to ensure that all staff and learners could gain access to the system once it was deployed. This involved ULCC working with the Redbridge College MIS team to develop an integrated solution. Redbridge College MIS were able to provide views from the learner records system and timetabling software to allow Moodle to only create accounts at first log in. The system was developed to ensure that learners and tutors were automatically enrolled (with the correct permissions/role) on the course for which they were timetabled.

Tutors then just deploy the PLP tool (Moodle block) and the empty PLPs are created for every learner who logs (or who had already logged) in. PLPs are associated with learners and not the course (as in the previous model) and so if learners transferred groups or courses the PLP follows. Also any learners attending more than one course will have input from their full range of tutors.

The PLP tool is updated each night with the attendance and punctuality data, as a percentage, from each programme of study. This is another example of MIS integration that facilitates effective tutorial discussions and target setting. The next steps are to include learner photographs from MIS and scores from the on-line initial diagnostic testing. Data fields are included that ensure learner data is mapped to the Moodle personal profiles. This allows learners to update their own personal details and the presence of mobile phone data will facilitate the introduction of the Txttools SMS module in January 2008.

The first big test for the system came during the preparation for parents' evening in November 2007. The system coped with all tutors making comments and setting targets for all learners they taught or tutored along with the setting of targets and red/amber status. ULCC provided a print button so that a properly formatted report could be produced to hand to parents following discussions that evening. All non-attending parents were sent the printed PLP to review. The system proved to be very stable and fit for purpose and 2088 PLPs were printed. Feedback from the night included; "Good and informative", "Very satisfied with information received from Tutors", "College has improved facilities and good tutors", "Very informative", "Concise and informative".

The Impact

The tool has had other benefits, Customer Services staff are able to check if students are on Red / Amber warning as it affects payment of EMA. Students have responded well to the instant access to their punctuality and attendance.

- "Having the Attendance / Punctuality data readily available on the PLP makes students more aware of their attendance figures
- Improved awareness by Personal Tutors of actions / targets set by Learning Mentor now they are also logged on the PLP, where previously it may have been in a paper-based file somewhere else;
- Students are taking the opportunity to comment on Subject / Personal Tutor comments on the PLP, so more aware of how their progress is perceived;
- Easier to log and monitor concerns added by team / Learning Mentor"

Dan Harding, Music tutor.

“Using the new PLPs has enabled meaningful dialogue between the tutors and their students; who are more engaged and focused. As a Curriculum Manager it has allowed me to review the progress of students across the range of courses for which I am responsible.”
Karen Brant, Curriculum Manager; Hair and Beauty.

“The new PLP has allowed me full access to review and set targets and has helped me communicate electronically with the students that I support. It has also created a much more effective concern and probation system that can be monitored by everyone involved in student behavior and discipline.” Rachel Cornish, Learning Mentor

Launched at the (Moodle) Moot 2007, it has been widely acclaimed and has well over 400 downloads in the last month. I have already recommended it several colleagues in the sector and have a number of ideas to take it further. The broader benefits will come with feedback and suggestions from the wider community of users as well as the synergy between ULCC and Redbridge College.