Birmingham Metropolitan College creates "Classroom in the Cloud"

Utilising social learning to boost student engagement and transform college operability

Overview

The need
Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet) is constantly seeking new ways to engage students and make education accessible to a more diverse user base. In order to synergise with the digital lifestyle of learners and compete in different markets, the college recognised that it needed to transform how it delivered learning.

The solution
Embarking on a strategic relationship with IBM, BMet began building "Classroom in the Cloud", based on IBM SmartCloud® for Social Business. When the project is complete, up to 25,000 students and 1,350 staff will be able to use the solution to access learning through a variety of mediums including the web and smart phones.

The benefit
Enables staff and students to collaborate across departments, providing access to a wealth of resources not easily available before. Potential to increase student engagement, retention and make education available to a wider population. Expected to cut down on travel costs and carbon footprint and increase productivity with staff and students.

Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet) is one of the largest colleges in the UK, offering a range of academic and vocational courses to more than 35,000 learners each year. Employing over 1,350 people, BMet has three main campuses and several satellite centres. The college prides itself on remaining at the forefront of advances in education, thereby delivering a transformational learning experience to its students.

"At BMet, we are constantly looking for ways to make the learning experience more engaging and accessible," says Jamie Smith, Director of Systems and Policy at Birmingham Metropolitan College. "Many students who drop out of courses leave in the early stages of their course. Building social networks and collaborating in those early stages can help students to learn, thrive and succeed in a way that wasn't previously possible."

Dr. Julie Nugent, Executive Director of Organisation and Strategic Development, continues, "We also saw an opportunity to reach an entirely new user-base. If we could make it possible for students to access learning from their homes and on the move, we could open up education to those who hadn't considered it before."

Finding the right partner
The challenge facing BMet was finding a partner that shared the same vision for technology-enabled learning, and could make this a reality for the college in a cost-effective manner.

"For such an ambitious project we wanted an equally ambitious partner – after all, you cannot cross a chasm in two small jumps," says Smith. "At an industry event I met a thought leader from the IBM Education Team who shared the College ambition and had some practical ideas for how we could achieve our goals. Indeed, we saw many similarities between our values and those of IBM – we are both organisations that strive to excel and are not afraid to push the boundaries of what is possible."

Solution Components

Software
- IBM SmartCloud® for Social Business

Services
- IBM Software Services for Lotus®

A social business...

Embraces networks of people to create business value and exhibits three underlying tenets. It is engaged, transparent, and nimble

Engaged
- Deliver learning to students outside the classroom, on the move, and on demand.

Transparent
- Introduce social networks that can help initiate the development of communities outside the classroom, encouraging learners to create an individual ecosystem of learning.

Nimble
- Enable teaching staff to collaborate across departments, sharing resources and working together in real time, reducing the need to travel between campus locations.

"Action Research" project takes off

Together, IBM and BMet devised the "Classroom in the Cloud" concept, a solution based on IBM SmartCloud for Social Business, an IBM Software as a Service offering. This would be the largest SmartCloud for Social Business implementation in Europe. Using the cloud-based social collaboration and networking tools offered by the IBM collaboration software – including file sharing, web conferencing and instant messaging – BMet could deliver learning to students outside the classroom, on the move, and on demand. The next step was to take the concept forward for rigorous testing and evaluation.

"The best way to figure out how to get the best out of the IBM SmartCloud for Social Business solution for BMet was to put it in the hands of the experts – our teaching staff," says Nugent. "We wanted them to be free to re-imagine the educational environment with no restraints, so that they could champion this technology and use it to its full potential. The advantage for us is that we received immediate feedback and inspiration for how the software could be used in practice."

"The results were highly encouraging," comments Smith. "While some teaching staff initially had concerns that the technology could impoverish the learning experience, the feedback from learners was extremely positive following the introduction of the IBM SmartCloud technology. Many said that seeing the positive impact on learners had given them a real buzz, reminding them why they had gone into teaching in the first place."

Benefits of "Classroom in the Cloud"

Over the next few months, BMet will continue to work with IBM to roll out the solution to all 1,350 of its employees, with students joining at the start of the next academic year. As BMet embarks on a journey with IBM towards full distribution of "Classroom in the Cloud", it has already begun to see evidence of the benefits.

"Although it is very early in the process, we expect the positive effects on our learners to be huge," explains Smith. "We have already seen that enabling learners to access education in a way that suits their lives makes a real difference. Introducing social networks can help initiate the development of communities outside the classroom, encouraging learners to create an individual ecosystem of learning. Ultimately, we want our students to have the best experience possible during their time at BMet, and we feel certain that giving them more choice in the tools they use to participate can only be a good thing.

"Our teaching staff will be able to collaborate across departments in a way that simply was not possible before, sharing resources and working together in real time," says Nugent. "We hope that providing cutting-edge technology to support their teaching will further inspire both teachers and students, resulting in greater success for BMet."

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As a result of the project, BMet's staff and students should have less need to travel between campus locations, which may reduce both costs and carbon footprint. Moreover, by revolutionising the way that education is delivered to students, BMet can now provide access to those in new education markets – including schools, young offenders, those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and students in other countries.

Developing the Smarter Planet Collaboratory

To encapsulate the rich partnership between IBM and BMet, a unique and unprecedented flagship facility is being created within BMet itself: the IBM Smarter Planet Collaboratory. This interactive physical space will incorporate IBM technology demonstrations and dynamic collaboration spaces for students, staff and stakeholders, benefiting both BMet and IBM.

It will include a conference room in which users can deliver and record a presentation, and kiosks running the interactive CityOne game, demonstrating the IBM Smarter Cities vision and allowing visitors to compete to run the smartest city. The Smarter Planet Collaboratory is designed to help establish BMet's position as a technology leader in the educational space and provide a unique inspirational learning space for the local community to engage with technology-enabled learning.

"We are extremely excited about the development of the IBM Smarter Planet Collaboratory," says Nugent. "Hands-on displays such as the Smarter Cities section and Smarter Planet themed booths will help give the 'wow' factor to BMet, showing our commitment to leveraging the latest technology to help our learners excel.

"The IBM Smarter Collaboratory is a pioneering achievement for both BMet and IBM in transforming the learner experience through a flagship facility representing our relationship and commitment to this education leader. This is just one of the many partnership benefits that we are mutually benefiting from. Watch this space."

For more information

To learn more about Social Businesses at IBM, contact your IBM sales representative or visit: **ibm.com**/socialbusiness

To learn more about Birmingham Metropolitan College, visit: **www.bmetc.ac.uk**