



IfL Asks...

Louis Strover, Director of Learning - Innovation and Capacity to Improve, at John Ruskin College, about the importance of personalised learning and whether the roll out of individual learning plans to 1,200 students was worth the effort.

Q: Tell us about John Ruskin College.

LS: We are a sixth form college in Croydon with over 1,200 students from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. We specialise in educating 16-19 year olds, providing them with everything they need to achieve their full potential and setting them on the path for a happy and successful career. We are proud of our students who consistently achieve good results for A level and vocational courses - we have one of the highest rates of progression to university.

Q: What is personalised learning and how does it affect the college?

LS: Personalised learning is about being able to take a highly responsive approach to the individual needs of each pupil to ensure that they are able to achieve their best. It requires strong links between teachers and pupils. Although most of our staff have been tailoring their teaching to meet the individual needs of pupils for years, the government's Personalised Learning Agenda put renewed focus on this aspect of best practice teaching in our college.

In particular, we wanted to make sure that all our teachers had the necessary resources available at their finger tips to be able to support personalised learning. One thing that became apparent was that although we had most of the systems and processes required - be it on paper or disparate IT systems - it was not in one place and it was not easy to access.

The students also had a part to play in instigating the rollout of individual learning plans (ILPs). Their satisfaction surveys showed that they loved the way they could access their attendance records online, but were disappointed they couldn't get more information on their grades, how they well they were performing, whether they were on track to achieve their goals, etc.

Q: What was the solution?

LS: We researched a number of different software solutions and finally chose eTracker, which has been designed by a small company called VLE Support, set up by a former teacher who was willing to tailor the solution to meet our specific needs. It did not take long to implement the software and VLE Support also integrated eTracker with our Management Information System and our attendance records software programme.

The resulting solution provides each pupil with their own ILP (sometimes referred to as an electronic individual learning plan or eILP) that can be accessed online 24/7. They can see their tutor's feedback, their grades and their attendance records.

At the start of each year, pupils agree their personal targets with their tutors, which for a Year 2 student, for example, might be the points required for their university application. A traffic light system provides a clear indicator of how well they are doing against their targets. Not only is this motivational, but it also makes it easy to spot any pupil at risk of not achieving their goals and so steps can be taken to support them.

Q: This sounds like a lot of additional work for the teachers?

LS: Actually it's not. Most of the input would have happened anyway, just on pieces of paper or on different IT systems. Now that it is online and integrated with the other applications, the data is much more meaningful for teachers, it is always up to date and they only have to input data once. They can see at a glance how well an individual student is doing, not just at their subject but across the board.

This also means that they can take a holistic view of their courses. Is attendance good? Is retention good? Are the pupils passing? There is no point in finding this information out at the end of the year when it is too late to do anything; it's far better to identify issues as they come up and be able to act upon them immediately.

Q: What do the pupils make of it?

LS: I have just come from a teaching a lesson and, in preparation for this interview, I asked them what they thought of eTracker. They said they liked to be able to sit in the comfort of their own home or a place of their choice and check their progress. They feel the online feedback from tutors is very personalised. They like to enter their own personal data into the system and check their marks against others in the group.

Q: Would you recommend online ILPs for other colleges?

LS: I think most schools and colleges will be required to do something similar over the next few years. The government has recently released its latest e-strategy document: 'Harnessing Technology- Next Generation Learning', in which it clearly states that one of its six key priorities is the integration of online personal support for children and learners.

I can only really speak for our college though, and I would say, without a doubt, that online ILPs have had a motivating influence on the students and it has helped to improve performance both academically and pastorally.

For more information on John Ruskin College, visit their website at www.johnruskin.ac.uk

ASSOCIATED IMAGES x 3 - IfL asks - John Ruskin College building/panoramic/Louis Strover