



City-Wide Learning Technology Raises the Quality of Education in Schools and Beyond

Overview

Country: United Kingdom

Industry: Education

Customer Profile

Leeds Learning Network is a city-wide network in Leeds that links schools, local education authorities, libraries, and other education centres in the city.

Business Situation

Education officers wanted to replace disparate systems at individual schools with a unified network, reducing management requirements and supporting faster deployment of learning tools.

Solution

Leeds Learning Network partnered with Synetrix to extend learning beyond the classroom with access to e-mail, a collaboration portal, and instant messaging, to empower all members of the community.

Benefits

- Improved teaching and learning.
- Personalised learning.
- Increased student participation.
- Support for lifelong learning.

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Greg Perry, ICT Coordinator, Kippax Greenfield Primary School

The city of Leeds is moving to the forefront of education in the United Kingdom by creating a local learning network. This connects 259 schools and more than 100,000 employees and students to deliver new educational and economic opportunities throughout the metropolitan borough. The Leeds Learning Network (LLN) uses Microsoft® Learning Gateway, based on Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007 to improve the quality of teaching, raise standards, and provide more learning opportunities for school pupils and adults across the city. By providing a standardised infrastructure to support classroom and community learning technologies, the LLN reduces management requirements at individual schools and supports fast, cost-effective deployment of the latest learning tools.



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Jason Rousell, Applications Architect, Synetrix

Situation

With a population of more than 750,000, Leeds is one of the largest cities in England, United Kingdom (U.K.). Government studies predict that over the next 10 years, the city and its surrounding area will create 65,300 new jobs, representing 93 per cent of employment for people in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

The growing economic opportunities available in Leeds depend on continuing investment in education and training. Already, Leeds is home to two universities with more than 45,000 students. In addition, the local education authority promotes innovation and high educational standards among 100,000 students and 15,000 employees at 259 local schools.

Jim Knight, the U.K. Minister for Schools, called for education authorities to harness technology to improve learning outcomes in 2007. At this time, Leeds was already ahead of schedule. Most schools in the city had a computer system in place but the technology often varied from school to school. This made it difficult to adopt new classroom and community learning technologies in a standardised, cost-effective way.

To address this, education officers at Leeds City Council wanted to create a unified technology structure to support lifelong learning across the borough. “The starting strategy was that we were going to get a better service delivered more efficiently and more effectively if we moved forward as a city, instead of each individual school doing it alone,” says Patrick Kirk, Head of e-Learning Services at Leeds Learning Network (LLN). “The majority of our schools don’t have the necessary technical knowledge to manage a complex e-learning environment, and many of the senior leaders within schools argue that it is better to buy into a managed service than

having to resource the service themselves,” says Kirk.

The original LLN was implemented in 2000 but by 2005 educational needs had outgrown the existing technology.

Solution

Network and application solution specialist Synetrix partnered with LLN to develop a new system using Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Portal Server 2003. Synetrix then configured the system and managed all required data migration projects.

Jason Rousell, Applications Architect at Synetrix, says: “The reason we chose SharePoint was because it addressed the two main challenges we were faced with. The first was to provide a large user base with access to e-mail, a collaboration portal, and instant messaging in a way that removed the normal barriers that prevent the uptake of such technologies. The second challenge was to ensure safety at all times.”

Microsoft Active Directory® service was key to addressing these issues. Synetrix wrote custom extensions to Active Directory that would work with the underlying data infrastructure used by all schools in the U.K. These extensions populate Active Directory in such a way that users with similar roles and priorities are automatically placed into the correct groups.

For example, students have a different experience and enjoy access rights to different parts of the system compared with teachers. “All of the data is entered into the management information system (MIS),” says Rousell. “Overnight, a link between the MIS and the system works out whether a pupil in a given school should have access to an e-mail account, a SharePoint site, a personal site, and instant messaging. It also

determines the filtering policy for his or her school.”

Parents and carers can also access information about their children’s activities and progress at school through the LLN. “What we have here is an environment that will support key themes within the national policy agenda—a ‘Gateway to Education services’ and real-time access to parents and carers,” says Kirk.

Synetrix developed a product, Direct Connect, which is used by school administrators to upload user data using a Web interface. This helps to reduce the administrative workload as pupils move up a year or change schools altogether. It also helps to manage people who move in and out of the county. In short, Leeds can now manage its 100,000 users in a practical and cost-effective way.

In 2007, LLN upgraded its Learning Gateway infrastructure to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007, and started to use SharePoint Learning Kit, which helps to meet the specific challenges of the education environment. Timetable data from the schools’ MIS system is integrated into the Office SharePoint Server 2007 learning kit component, which forms part of each school’s Web presence. With this system, teachers and students can create collaborative online spaces called My Sites. When teachers log on, they can create a new sub-site that contains all of the students who take a particular class. Teachers can now add all of their students with a single click, instead of having to add them one by one.

Benefits

The LLN has helped Leeds to meet government targets for providing broadband access, managed learning environments, and online storage space for individual pupils before 2008. In addition, it has revolutionised the teaching and learning processes in the city’s schools.

Improving Teaching and Learning

Before the system-wide network was put into place to connect 450 schools, libraries, and city learning centres, collaboration between schools was difficult and infrequent. Instant messaging and a consistent e-mail system have enabled better communication and collaboration, but the most popular development is the ability to build online collaboration sites.

These workspaces are being used at all levels of teaching and learning to extend learning beyond the classroom. Now, for example, educators can instantly exchange ideas and share files, such as lesson plans and administrative documents. So far, 106 collaborative sites have been created for teachers and support staff, with titles such as “Behaviour Management,” “Maths Collaboration Site,” and “Leadership and Teacher Development.” Sites for students include subject study guides such as “A Level Chemistry Guide,” and interest groups such as “The Arts Network.”

“With this kind of activity, the concept of collaboration between schools and like-minded groups has really taken off and has grown almost organically without large-scale marketing from LLN,” says Rousell. “It’s indicative of what’s happening with the Web more generally in terms of increased focus on user-generated content that is driven by users’ needs, rather than by corporate needs.”

Personalised Learning in Collaborative Learning Environments

Collaborative learning environments allow more flexibility for personalised learning. This is because schools and teachers can structure resources around classes, age groups, or ability. Staff and pupils can access work files and assignments from anywhere at any time, which is particularly helpful for

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students who are part of the travelling community and for those who go on extended trips to other countries.

Greg Perry, ICT Coordinator at Kippax Greenfield Primary School says, “The LLN is already making a huge impact and the benefits to school life are already evident. Students love contributing to the discussion forums, being able to access their work at home, and now have their own personal area that they can contribute to and customise.”

In addition to informing teaching and learning activities, LLN helps to promote social responsibility and save money through green initiatives. Brigshaw High School and Language College, for example, used LLN to replace the school’s paper diary, giving all teachers in the school immediate access to information on important events and eliminating the use of paper. Key school documents were put into the staff area of the network so that teachers can access documents from home. “The Learning Network will truly reinforce the effectiveness of our school as a learning community for everyone,” says Conrad Romer, Curriculum Area Leader of New Technologies and Learning Resources at Brigshaw.

Engaging with Students

The most measurable benefit of the LLN is increased interest and participation from students. Eight primary schools in Leeds have integrated videoconferencing into the classroom with an annual quiz modelled on University Challenge, a U.K. television

programme. With interactive whiteboards, students in all classrooms can watch the quiz live and cheer on those who participate. “Each year the competition gets better and better and the children get quite involved. The teachers enjoy it and we’ve been asked to do it for high schools next year—it is going to be quite a challenge to come up with the questions,” says Victoria Relton, Marketing Communications Manager at LLN. The top scoring school from Leeds competes with the winning school from St Helens, Lancashire. The winners receive a shield and videoconferencing equipment.

Lifelong Learning Beyond the Classroom

To create a framework for economic and educational opportunity, Leeds is extending the Learning Network beyond the school system. Libraries have the facility to create their own collaboration portals. All school sites and library sites across the city can also collaborate. “The first step towards broadening out what we’ve done for schools to the rest of the community is to give library users access to SharePoint and help them to create their own collaborative sites. Other user groups will follow,” says Rousell.

Microsoft Server Product Portfolio

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Software and Services

- Microsoft Office
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- Technologies
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