brightspace™
by D2L

The power of teachers united

A flexible learning platform gives all students access to enriched resources

Overview

The only downside of teachers at the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) loving their new Web 2.0 tools was that they loved a very wide variety of them.

They all had different usernames, passwords, and URLs. While the Board used a standardized blogging platform built in-house, they were also branching out in different areas to use different LMS-like tools. That meant they were unable to support one another and, since they were being hosted in a variety of spaces, it was next to impossible for the Board to provide guidance.

How would HWDSB bring together all these elements with one system so that teachers and students could work and build together? That's where D2L comes in.

AT A GLANCE

Client   HWDSB

Students   Approximately 48,000

Level   K–12

Solutions   Brightspace Blended
                Learning solution

CHALLENGE

- Unify teachers on learning platform with a single sign-on solution
- Deploy a solution that students and teachers want to use
- Ensure the system takes parents' needs into account
- Set the stage for blended learning
- Allow for scalability and flexibility

SOLUTION

- Integrate the Board's active directory and implement SIS integration
- Leverage the LTI solution to link to third party tools and resources
- Empower teachers with tools that enrich education

RESULT[1]

- Increase in secondary school student usage from less than 20% to 70%
- From fewer than 100 elementary school students online to 1,000 in 6 months
- Innovative use of technology in schools, such as flipped classrooms

Challenge

ONE SYSTEM TO ADDRESS EVERYONE'S NEEDS

To bring teachers back into the fold, the Board needed a single learning platform that would make every one of them happy. At the same time, the learning platform also had to link to other Web 2.0 tools and provide a single sign-on solution.

"Ideally, that would allow us to create a student portal where all the necessary learning resources are located," says Paul Hatala, Blended Learning Instructional Coach of HWDSB. "We wanted students to have a seamless experience as they moved from tool to tool. We also wanted a strategy where our teachers and parents could see what resources students are accessing—and how they're progressing through content."

TECHNOLOGY THAT MAKES BLENDED LEARNING POSSIBLE

While the immediate goal was to implement a stronger and more unified approach to their online learning solutions, the Board's long-term goal was to deploy a blended learning strategy. At the end of the day, the Board wanted a learning platform that would help expand on the face-to-face experience.

"We don't see the Brightspace platform replacing the teacher," says Hatala. "We wanted additional resources that would really enhance what's going on in the classroom. We wanted to enrich the face-to-face environment by building in some excellent digital resources and digital tools that support student learning."

SCALABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY AS ESSENTIALS

Even though the Ontario Ministry of Education is using the Brightspace platform across the province, each individual board presents a unique and specific challenge. "We didn't want an out-of-the box, chunky solution," says Hatala. "We wanted something more customized to the specific needs of our Board."

He adds, "And because we can't predict what technology will be five years from now, or what our needs will be, it was really important to be able to add to the infrastructure without having to overhaul everything. We must be able to scale up or scale back as we go."

"The transition was really easy. D2L did most of the legwork. Our job was getting content ready, then testing and reporting back with problems. They did everything in the background to make sure it was working the way we wanted."

Paul Hatala, Blended Learning Instructional Coach,
Hamilton Wentworth District School Board

Solution

IT TAKES COMMUNICATION TO ACHIEVE CUSTOMIZATION

Before anything else, a meaningful conversation was needed to establish the Board's requirements. "We worked closely with our Brightspace account manager and project specialist," says Hatala. "They understood our goals and were able to advise us on the best strategy without trying to include everything under the sun. They were great. They listened to our ideas and came back to us with a plan to get started."

The plan? The first step was integrating the board's active directory so that students would be able to log in to the Brightspace using the same username and password they use to access school computers. Next, they had to apply Student Information System (SIS) integration. By pulling course information, teachers no longer needed to request a course shell and didn't have to manage their own class lists. The final step, leveraging Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI), would allow key user information to be passed to third-party applications and used to authenticate the user.

Together, these three components of the Brightspace platform create a seamless environment that affords students across the Board easy access to a variety of tools and resources—both in the Brightspace platform and beyond.

HOSTING CONTENT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

According to Hatala, teachers expected a new space to post their content and no more. Instead, they gained the ability to link all data objects, integrate lessons, and learn from other teachers. Now, they can monitor students' progress and track their success online rather than doing it manually—and they can enrich their classroom content with other sources.

The change affects parents, too. Teachers can use the system to keep parents in the loop by reporting back with constructive information about their child's progress. Parents can also go online themselves to see the actual resources being used by students.

Much more than just a space for hosting content, the learning platform is becoming an integral part of the learning process. "Because teachers like using it, they use it more often. That's helping to create rich classroom environments where students can learn on their own, then communicate with the expert teacher to make sure they understand the content," says Hatala. "That's what blended learning is all about."

IT'S EASY TO SCALE...AND SCALE...

Since making the changes, the number of students using the learning platform across the Board has more than tripled.[2] They've needed serious scaling.

"But getting bigger hasn't been a problem for us," says Hatala. "As for adding new technology, it's a matter of contacting the vendor and telling them what we want and the language Brightspace communicates in, and off they go. We have been able to add a variety of tools as we build. It's really straightforward."

Like school boards, Hatala adds, each school is unique and presents unique challenges for the learning platform: "There's lots of flexibility in terms of how we roll this out to the whole Board, and that's made the process somewhat painless."

Result

CLASSROOMS ARE GOING ONLINE IN RECORD NUMBERS

Before implementing the Brightspace platform, less than 20% of secondary students across the Board were using the online resources offered. Now, 70% are actively using the Brightspace platform and there is no sign of that adoption slowing down.[3]

What's more, fewer than 100 elementary students were using the platform at the start of the year, and by the midway point, that number skyrocketed to 1,000.[4] Hatala notes: "Because of the easy access and the convenience of having all the resources in one space, teachers were comfortable with getting their students started. Students are getting the benefits of blended learning early."

"This technology gives students the ability to work independently and develop the critical thinking skills that are so crucial for success outside of the classroom."
Paul Hatala, Blended Learning Instructional Coach, Hamilton Wentworth District School Board

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STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ARE PUSHING FOR GROWTH

"Students are actually asking their teachers to use Brightspace as their learning platform," he says. "They tell us they like the fact that it's one-stop-shopping for classroom resources."

Teachers are enthusiastic, too. Hatala reports that the board is seeing an increase in requests for information and support—and they're happy to provide teachers with what they need. "Now, we offer regular after-school webinars and training sessions to further develop our teachers' online skills. The more they know about the learning platform, the more students benefit."

Some teachers are also getting their feet wet with flipped classrooms. "Putting content online allows them to use classroom time to identify struggles and tackle them head on," says Hatala. "Instead of students being frustrated at night when the teacher isn't accessible, the teacher is right there to offer support, suggestions, and advice."

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K–12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | www.brightspace.com

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