



Building digital confidence at Teesside University in collaboration with Blackboard Academy



Background

Teesside University, located in the heart of Middlesbrough, a large town in North Yorkshire, England, is a 20,000 students higher education institution with an ambitious and pragmatic approach for solving real-world problems and transforming lives and economies through innovation, research, education, and engagement with business and the professions.

A longtime Blackboard partner, Teesside University decided to collaborate this time with Blackboard Academy, to accelerate digital transformation using the transition to Learn Ultra as an opportunity.

The Challenge

The digital transformation team at Teesside was looking for a robust strategy and design for the delivery of their institutional CPD programme (Continuous Professional Development), starting with approximately 700 faculty members. At the same time, the team wanted to leverage this transition to drive culture change, raise awareness of the profound benefits of using digital technologies, and to seamlessly integrate their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) into their everyday work.

The objective was twofold: not only upskilling in terms of the functional aspects of the platform, but also driving a mindset change in terms of the daily impact in the classroom. This is: how digital spaces can improve the learning experience with the use of technology as a natural continuation or enhancement of what happens inside the classroom, from the understanding that many tasks can be accomplished in a more efficient, inclusive, and effective way.

“We wanted to use this move to Ultra as an intervention to drive culture change, as a mind-shift in the perception of digital technologies, so people can see the VLE as an integral part of what they do”

– Paul Durston,
Digital Learning Manager,
Teesside University.

Paul Durston leads the team of Digital Learning Specialists working as part of the Digital Transformation team at Teesside. His team’s goal is to enhance teaching practices through digital solutions, transforming the experience so students can receive impactful learning with the best possible quality. His team is especially motivated by the work done with the academic staff, mentoring and empowering them to boost their innovation and their creativity in the teaching practices in a way that reflects on the learning experiences they design and deliver for their students.

As Digital Learning Manager, Paul’s role consists of ensuring that such goals can be achieved, even during a pandemic. This means that he must find effective alternatives to engage with students and adapt to the unprecedented situation. When the team last facilitated a large scale CPD programme, they did so on campus. This time, the challenge was trying to do the same thing remotely, which presented difficulties regarding the attention timespan of staff, but more generally in the blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities delivered by the CPD programme. All of this, on top of a very busy time of the year, coinciding with an evaluation period, the summer holidays, and having only three months to get the 700 academic staff through the programme, remotely.



The Solution

With all these challenges ahead, the Teesside team decided to collaborate with Blackboard Academy in February 2021, initially to train a group of six facilitators, using an intensive version of Blackboard's Digital Teaching and Learning Series to inform the design of their own CPD programme. Thanks to this intensive dedication, the team ran the first session with faculty in early May. This group of facilitators, in turn, emerged as Blackboard Certified Practitioners and Accredited Facilitators to deliver the course.

As the team had to strike a balance between content and pace, they really needed to focus on what they thought was essential, the basics of what teachers truly really need with a VLE: how to navigate within the environment, how to add any type of content or activities, how to assess, to communicate with students and foster collaboration. The Digital Learning Specialists designed and delivered four one-hour synchronous sessions that proved to be a very effective method of addressing these key areas. In addition to these synchronous sessions, related supplementary activities were designed for colleagues to undertake in a 'sandbox' course to really cement their learning through hands-on experience.

Communication and coordination also played an important role in managing change. According to Mr. Durston, having senior management across the academic Schools on board was pivotal to the success of the project; playing a lead role in each of Teesside's five Schools, clearly communicating to their colleagues the five key principles that underpinned the CPD and how they fit with both School and institutional Strategic direction were crucial steps in this change process. This collaboration with School senior management further strengthened the relationship between the Digital Transformation team and the Schools - yet another benefit surrounding the initiative.

Digital Confidence is a concept used by the team to gauge progress and it is worth mentioning as it is the basis for how they work. Some institutions can be reluctant to change and, sometimes, within the educators community, introducing a new method, tool or technology, can generate fear and resistance. It is only when people develop confidence, that change is perceived in a positive manner, as the outcome made the process worthwhile. Digital confidence, in this case, is achieved when the platform is used to improve, when people can understand the value and spot opportunities in what they've learned, rather than just having a basic level of familiarity with concepts. This sets the foundations for a journey in terms of academic practice from fear, to literacy, to confidence.

Teesside's Digital Transformation team was able to achieve a remarkable 96% satisfaction rate among the 700 trained staff, on 26 cohorts during three months and 204 hours of live facilitation. Another pleasing metric, particularly given the team's focus on enhancing staff digital fluency, saw 91% of participants say they now felt more confident in their use of Learn Ultra. An additional 25 academic staff completed their CPD programme and went on to obtain their Blackboard Certified Practitioner recognition. As a testament to the quality of the CPD delivered at Teesside, an audit was performed looking for compliance of key criteria defined by the team across their five Schools; three Schools achieved 100% compliance, and the remaining two over 80%.

"...the role Blackboard Academy played in making our CPD as high quality as it was" [...] "it wouldn't have been as successful without the input from Blackboard Academy and without the upskilling of our facilitators."

– **Paul Durston**,
Digital Learning Manager,
Teesside University.



▲ **Paul Durston**, Digital Learning Manager, Teesside University.

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