



Costello Technology College School

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Costello Technology College

Educating today's children for tomorrow's world

Costello Technology College is an establishment at the forefront of ground-breaking technologies. Rolling out the Frog learning platform in June 2008 the college's online activity has gone from strength to strength in a matter of months. Using the platform as a home for the college's YouTube channel, the copious portals feature stimulating, interactive and engaging content that appeal to all ages and ICT abilities.

Background

Costello Technology College, a specialist technology establishment, caters for 1,010 11-16 year old boys and girls. Located in the heart of Basingstoke, the college has a diverse catchment area of socio-economic backgrounds and academic abilities. The college's mission is 'to educate today's children for tomorrow's world.'

Challenges

Dominic Tester, Assistant Head Teacher, described the challenges faced by the college and what he felt was the answer: "Our students were not engaging fully with e-learning three years ago. Although they could access their work at home through the school intranet, e-learning was not viewed as a delivery method for the children's education. The teachers had a very basic email system however we were keen to take this to the next step. Not only were we looking for whole school communication and collaboration but also building stronger links with the wider community.



“Previously student voice was monitored and furthered through formal face-to-face meetings, something that we wanted to fully exploit. In order to do this the students needed to be able to voice their thoughts and opinions whenever necessary, something that could not happen through termly meetings. We were looking for a system that allowed for open discussion and debate such as open forums.”

In 2006 the college was highly aware of the emerging diversity of learning platforms and was keen to consider as many options as possible, to ensure a sound decision was made. Costello required a system that was highly flexible, one that could adapt to the culture of the college, mirror its education and management objectives and one that could grow with the establishment. The college was keen to promote collaborative working amongst the teaching staff, pupils and surrounding community. A system was needed that catered for a range of ages and ICT abilities.

Solution

In May 2008, the college organised a procurement day whereby three learning platform providers were invited to demonstrate their attributes. To achieve the most out of e-learning, collaboration is key. Dominic explained why: “We were keen to involve as many stakeholders as possible in the decision making process so that the whole school would benefit greatly from the roll out of a learning platform. Parents, governors, students, teachers and non-teaching staff were all involved in our decision. It was paramount that our whole school population had a shared ownership of the vision and opportunities of the learning platform.”

Two months later (June 2008) the college made a final decision to partner with Frog. Dominic remembered: “We wanted a system that put us in the driving seat, one that had many development tools so that we could design the portals to match our school ethos.”

The 2008/2009 academic year commenced with the installation of the Frog learning platform and the college has not looked back since. “We were extremely aware that the roll out of the learning platform had to be meticulously organised. In order for Frog to be seamlessly embedded into our school day we decided on a phased roll out. Between September and Christmas 2008 our specialist departments led the way. Maths, Science and Technology became our ‘champions of change’; they learned the ropes with Frog and from January 2009 they started to work with and support other departments on how to fully take advantage of the world of Frog,” added Dominic.



Benefits

Frog has dramatically increased the college's potential to enhance teaching, learning, management and leadership. "It is so much more than a Virtual Learning Environment. The learning platform has amplified the opportunities to raise the college's profile and attainment levels. We are only at the start of our journey with Frog and already we have witnessed some amazing changes and also added some exciting projects to our portfolio," said Dominic.

In order for teachers to understand how to utilise Frog to their utmost ability the college rolled out a 'mini vision portal.' Here the teaching staff of Costello Technology College can access an array of screen casts of Frog and follow a guided tour around the platform. It provides a thorough explanation of the college's vision of e-learning and is used as a way to train teachers about Frog, using Frog.

Frog Wardens

In October 2008 a team of Frog Wardens was announced at Costello Technology College. 20 students across the whole school, four from each year group (7-11), were assigned as Frog Wardens and given additional responsibilities to moderate the learning platform. To acknowledge their role the Frog Wardens wear a Frog Champion badge and a letter was sent home to their parents recognising this achievement. Dominic revealed: "Peer interaction is very powerful. Through half termly meetings the Frog Wardens update us on their work and we also have a 'think-tank' as to how we can progress the platform further. In its early stages we had to assist the Wardens in monitoring the platform and a small selection of forum posts had to be removed but now, four months on, it is self regulating. Students respect that their peers are examining their usage of the platform and this has resulted in a very mature approach to all aspects of the platform as well as academic commitment."

Governors leap into action

October 2008 also saw the launch of the Governor portal. In order to implement the portal effectively a meeting was arranged to demonstrate the potential of Frog to the governors. "The governors are very pleased with the portal which is a reflection in their involvement in the procurement process. An interesting question and answer session was had at the meeting - governors were thinking quite creatively and 'out of the box' as to how the platform could be developed. The governors are already using the forums to make constructive comments about the development of the portal, in addition to supporting school improvement projects. Currently there are three governor administrators, including the chair of governors and clerk to the governors. The chair of governors is very keen to see the portal develop as a vehicle to direct and steer much of the work of the governing body and can see the potential of collaboration for the future," said Dominic.



Happy posting

An immediate benefit of the learning platform was the use of discussion forums. A number of forums have been developed to engage students and encourage them to develop a collaborative culture throughout the college, not just between staff and students but also peer-to-peer interaction. Each academic department has its own forum allowing homework discussions and also a channel for student voice. Dominic revealed: "Our students have suggested a number of additional forums they would like. Interestingly these have all revolved around school related activities. We now have one for the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme as well as computers and technology. I see the forums as a powerful 'hook' to keep students engaged whilst staff and departments rapidly deploy their own resources onto Frog."

Dominic added: "The students love the platform; 'digital natives' as we now refer to them are not fazed by technology; they expect it and are so very quick to engage with all of the opportunities presented to them."

Safer neighbourhoods

An additional exciting project that has resulted from the implementation of Frog is the college's safer neighbourhood scheme. The discussion forum for this project regularly features a stream of questions from the students asking about Hampshire Police and its work. "Feedback from Hampshire Police has been excellent. PCSO Alex Wheatland views the developments here at Costello as an excellent way of engaging external services with our students and helps to support the delivery of the Hampshire Children's Plan. She is particularly keen to use the forums as a way of communicating with our wider student community to develop supportive relationships," said Dominic.

Extending the boundaries of learning

Home access has been another stimulating project for the college. Secure Gateway, launched in January 2009, is a service designed to empower all students and staff to access their files from the college infrastructure in the comfort of their own homes. The benefits of remote access that the college has reaped have been 'tremendous'. Dominic explained why, "Firstly, it gives staff access to SIM's remotely; secondly students can have access to the college's full suite of software, not just what they have installed on their machine at home."

Costello Technology College has even extended its digital experience to YouTube where there is a channel specifically for the Costello students. The channel showcases all of the work of the students and learning community. Videos include an overview of Frog, the Year 10 army experience, the Frog transition portal, the Tate Modern school visit, and the



Centenary Fashion Show, to name a few. Many of the videos have been edited by the students themselves.

(Visit <http://www.youtube.com/CostelloTechCollege>)

Looking forward

The college is avidly working on three further developments, a transition portal, community engagement portal and a leadership/ management portal. The transition portal is to be a highly innovative, engaging and captivating area for Year 6 students to access and familiarise themselves with Costello Technology College. Through Web 2.0 applications Dominic has created numerous movies that are hosted online. Script, scene, character, music and sound effect design are all in the hands of the user as Dominic explained. "My thinking behind this is to offer engaging content that will capture the minds of our Y6 students, supporting the move from primary to secondary school. Testimonials from Year 7s will also be placed on the portal to comfort the younger students." The college feels that this is very important as the younger students can relate to their peers.

As an establishment that is keen to offer its knowledge and expertise to the wider community, the college places community engagement high on the agenda. An area that is currently being developed are online events designed specifically for the parents of the school allowing for discussion and thought provoking debate as to how they can help to further the college's development and profile. Parents will be able to converse with other parents but also directly with the school. "Online events are quite simple to manage with initial invites and follow up documentation being distributed to parents both before and after the event," explained Dominic.

Community learning courses, INSET days, training courses and events to engage local business partners will also play a regular role on the community engagement portal.

The third development, the leadership/management portal, looks to streamline administrative workload at the college. It has been designed to move the school forward in terms of management and leadership. An online form based system will be embedded for lesson observations to be recorded. Dominic commented: "It is essential to remember that learning platforms do so much more than increase the opportunities for teaching and learning. They are perfect for raising standards in educational management and leadership. The learning platform is embedded in our school culture so why not filter it through all avenues of school life. We really are taking it to the next level."



Future plans

Costello Technology College has only adopted a small proportion of what Frog offers, therefore has many innovative ideas for the future. Immediate plans are to roll out a parent portal to 'fuse information dissemination, collaboration and social networking technologies.' Students' parents will become much more involved in the learning and academic progress of their children. The college looks forward to acting as a pilot school for Frog 3.0 in the near future. Once complete the college will launch the finalised version of the parent portal. With Government targets stating that every school should have a learning platform by 2010, Costello Technology College is already one very big leap ahead.

An additional future plan is a specialist technology portal. Partnerships with primary and secondary schools are very important to Costello Technology College so it is currently in the early stages of designing a portal that can be used to engage with staff at other schools. The college is keen to secure shared ownership of numerous technology projects and with its expertise it looks forward to developing deeper relationships with its partner schools. Discussion forums will encourage 'cross fertilisation of primary teachers' conversing about their teaching methods and classroom projects.

Dominic concluded: "The key to a successful learning platform is collaboration and thinking 'outside the box.' It is essential that schools buy into a concept or vision, rather than a generic, off-the-shelf product. With this comes whole school improvement and students that not only want to be educated but ones that are keen to place themselves as pillars of the community and citizens of the future."