MyPC @ Newcastle-under-Lyme College

Newcastle-under-Lyme College is a medium/large tertiary College situated in North Staffordshire. It is single-site but contains three Learning Resources Centres with various different facilities and opening times. Across the three centres are 133 computers which are used for a combination of open access, one-off classes and some IT key skills classes. The computers have a variety of different software applications, depending on licensing arrangements.

We have always struggled with allocating computers. We used an in-house spreadsheet booking system which didn't cope at all with rationing time and class bookings were a nightmare. We had to manually walk round asking people to log off because a class was coming in – then half the time they didn't turn up! Also, at busy times, students could bypass the booking system and just log on to a machine. This often led to big gangs round machines, not necessarily working, and the behaviour was getting worse.

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We had been looking at different systems for a long time but hadn't found anything, which suited our combination of open access and class bookings.

When we first saw the demonstration of MyPC we could see that although it didn't have every feature we wanted, all the basic requirements were there with flexibility for alterations in future upgrades. One of the main things we liked about MyPC compared to other systems was the ability to have as many admin machines as we want – so I can check on it from my office as well as having it available on all of our helpdesks. We can look at any of the 3 areas from any admin machine anywhere. Also, very importantly, students don't see anything different on LRC machines than IT classrooms – the log on procedure is identical everywhere so there isn't any confusion. Students are imported from Active Directory so there is no need to manually input, and if they haven't got a user ID or aren't enrolled, they can't get on (unless we want to let them on as a guest).

We'd never go back to the old system now. We mainly bought MyPC as a way of controlling bookings, which it does very effectively, but we didn't expect the other things that came with it – mostly, the improved behaviour of students and a more studious atmosphere throughout the LRCs.

We tried to install MyPC over Summer 2004 but due to problems our end with new computers arriving late, we actually went ahead during October half-term. Summer would have been better because you can get students used to the system right from day one. It's fair to say that the first half term had some glitches. When the system worked it worked well but we had frequent crashes and lots of problems – some because of the way our network was set up and some because MyPC was not ready for particular issues we encountered. Throughout this time technical support and our Account Manager were in constant touch and were looking at our server remotely and testing new updates. Just before Christmas a patch was applied which seemed to solve all our problems and we have never looked back.

Now (October 2005) we are well into a new year and things are so much better than we've ever known them. Several of our requests for increased functionality were included in a summer upgrade. Students were all told about the system in induction and know how it works and what to expect. All of our key skills classes are booked into the system in advance, and

class bookings are easy to add and edit. The PC monitoring system is integrated into the main booking screen, making it easy to see what students are doing, and letting them know if it is something they shouldn't be! Students are taking control of their own learning and booking computers in advance when they know they will need one – and if they don't turn up the computer switches to available so anyone can use it.

There are many options regarding how to run MyPC. We have a small bank of short stay PCs on Open Access – anyone can use them without booking for up to 20

minutes– but all of the rest have to be booked at one of the helpdesks with a student card. We decided on this for 2 reasons – it deters likely troublemakers, and the staff feel they get to know the students better. We have played around with timings and default settings, and can alter them at different times of the year if we feel necessary. We now ban students from using computers in the LRC using MyPC as soon as they receive a second overdue notice for library books. We find this a very effective method of getting books back! (They can still log on if they are part of a class booking). We can run various reports on peak usage etc – but one I find particularly useful is staff who book groups in and then don't turn up. I can take my list along to those staff and tell them that they can't book groups in anymore!
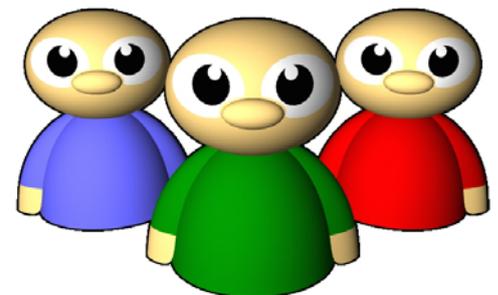

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