



National College for School Leadership (NCSL)



CASE STUDY

Combining professional development and networking facilities, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) connects thousands of England's school leaders and managers, via their online community talk2learn. Beginning with a standard learning management system, NCSL was soon faced with the need to provide an online collaboration environment where it had control over the development of the tools to meet the increasing demands of its user base.

Powered by the Fronter Open Learning Platform, NCSL implemented talk2Learn, an online community facility. With 24/7 access to resources, social networks and support, the new LMS allowed members to gain entry to a single platform combining the benefits of web 2.0 technology and online learning and development.

The NCSL

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is a non-departmental public body in the UK, reporting directly to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Launched in November 2000, NCSL was formed in order to develop leadership skills and capacity in schools through ongoing training, development and support for the country's senior teachers and school leaders.

What was the Situation

A highly successful and innovative organization the NCSL offers continuous professional development for the England's school leaders and managers in the form of online training programs, online discussions, professional networks and links to relevant educational policy and policy makers.

Soon after its founding in 2000, NCSL adopted Oracle's Think.com online collaboration tool, which was free to use. However, as NCSL increased its user base, they needed to move to a more appropriate online collaboration environment which could meet its growing capacity needs and offer the right level of security for its users.

NCSL needed a system that could offer further flexibility and a structured support system. They were looking for a system in which they could make a long term investment, and therefore wanted to have a role in its development direction and process.

'We needed a more robust system that would offer the level of scalability needed for the college to expand this essential internet based service.'

Aidan Melling

Implementing talk2Learn

What was the goal?

The goal of the talk2learn project was to create an online collaboration platform that would have the ability to grow and develop with the NCSL for the next 10 years. The NCSL online community would encompass a wide spectrum of human and content resources making use of both formal and informal learning methodology.

Online training courses and professional development programs would be found in the same area as network support systems, discussions, hot seats and educational resource material. The system would be fully scalable, ensuring that the network of school leaders across the UK could grow to one day incorporate a number of up to 250 000 UK and international school leaders.



What Were the Challenges?

NCSL implemented their new online community facility in 2004, powered by the Fronter Open Learning Platform. The NCSL branded their new learning platform 'talk2learn,' which today operates as a fully functional and dynamic online community with over 100 000 registered users signing in.

There were however many challenges at the start of the project, which had to be considered and resolved:

Customized System needs

A standard learning platform or Learning Management System (LMS) needed to be adapted to meet the needs of a customized application with a specific purpose.

Minimum Downtime

With already a user base of approximately 50 000, the transfer between learning solutions needed to take place as quickly and smoothly as possible in order that down time could be minimized.

Limited Re-training

The new system needed to have an easy to navigate interface and intuitive structure so as to limit the amount of training and retraining necessary for new and current members.

Integration

talk2learn needed to be seamlessly integrated with a variety of learning packages and technologies already in use by the NCSL, to enable all resources and applications to be accessible from a single platform via a single sign on.

Project Results

From first order to completion ('go-live'), the talk2learn project took only 12 months to complete. Now 4 years later, talk2learn has over 100 000 members from across the UK and has the ability to cope with a yet expanding user base.

Designing and customizing the Fronter platform to suit the needs of NCSL was undoubtedly the largest challenge, as the needs of such a large variety of users and applications had to be met. However, with the ever expanding user base and high active user ratios, the talk2learn system has been proven to be a success and far beyond a simple resource to thousands of school leaders.

A tight service level agreement is in place to guarantee security and quick resolution of any user issues or support needs. Single sign on capability has been achieved giving users access to all functionality within the same platform.

'talk2learn is fully integrated into the college's online learning tools. The registration system is seamlessly connected to talk2learn and linkage is made from all learning resources to and from talk2learn.'

Aidan Melling

With such a long term investment made into a learning platform solution, one of the main goals was to ensure that the development of the platform and its capabilities were in line with the ever changing needs of the NCSL community. In today's age of web 2.0 technology, blogs and wikis, it is vital that any learning platform can continue to grow and support new technology. This development goal has not only been achieved but is continuing as the platform's growth is determined by reference groups comprised of the product's everyday users and education professionals.

talk2Learn Today

'I have a network of colleagues all over the country, although we have never actually met.'

School leader in a small primary school

What you can Find

Online Discussions

NCSL's main community, NCSL in dialogue, hosts discussions between school leaders and leading educationalists, government ministers and policy officials. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) frequently requests hot seat discussions with school leaders in order that they can gather confidential and professional feedback on policy proposals and other issues.

Examples of discussions featured on NCSL in Dialogue:

- Encouraging Diversity in Leadership
- Eco-Friendly Schools
- Assessment for Learning
- A Dialogue with Steven Crowne, Chief Executive of Becta (British Educational Communications Technology Agency)

Online Communities

Alongside this main community, are a range of smaller communities that support different programs of study. Here participants are organized into tutor groups where they receive support both from their peers and their program facilitators.

talk2learn also enables smaller groups to create their own online communities with a specific identity or characteristic in common. These groups can create their own home page with subsidiary pages which are still linked into the greater talk2learn community. This means that users can be members of multiple communities depending on their interests and context.



Blogging

Blogs are used extensively within talk2learn, and have been very useful in sharing reflections on different aspects of leadership.

Easily accessible to a wide readership, one school leader (Iain Gilmour) kept a blog through his first year of headship at his primary school. His blog documented his day to day experiences including applying for headship, his successful appointment and then onto the situations and experiences that he went through – a thoroughly valuable resource for aspiring leaders and other new head teachers to read and engage with.

"Iain's blog - and those of his fellow diarists - make a great contribution to the school leadership debate. They enable participants to air their views, let off steam, exchange ideas and support each other."

Resource Repository

talk2learn also serves as a repository for resources. The ease of upload/download of materials makes the online community a valuable collection of tutoring and program content. Links to relevant topics, podcasts and external websites all appear on the talk2learn platform, making the community a powerful source of up-to-date information.

Introducing new members

NCSL online communities have developed an introductory flash animation of talk2learn, highlighting the benefits and past experiences/opinions of some of the active online community members. In addition to this, there are online training programmes as well as tutors available to help guide new members through talk2learn.

The NCSL has also published a document entitled '100 000 heads are better than one.' This book shares the lessons that NCSL has learnt through developing the 'world's largest online learning community for school leaders.'

Conclusion

talk2learn has created a platform from which professional and personal communication and collaboration can take place. Combining the principles of lifelong learning, development and social networking, a space has been created to connect and support the people who play such a vital role in running and shaping our children's education and future.

From formal discussions with policy makers and anonymous brainstorming, to casual yet insightful personal blogs, the everyday experiences, choices and future of England's education system can be supported and guided. A unique blend of the professional and unmistakably human insight can be emphasized, in this online collaboration environment.

To find out more about NCSL and their talk2learn online communities, please visit the following website:
<http://www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities/>