

Using Course Data in Illuminate to Celebrate—and Expand—Successful Teaching and Learning

University of Northampton had questions around student engagement in virtual courses. They decided to leverage Anthology Illuminate to not only answer those questions, but to uncover excellent practice in teaching and learning.



New in Northampton

While the University of Northampton itself is one of England’s youngest universities, the first institution of higher education in Northampton was established in the 13th century, then dissolved by King Henry III for fear that it was a threat to Oxford. The current University of Northampton was formed through the amalgamation of other institutions, including a teacher’s college, a technical school, and a nursing and midwifery college. It was named University College Northampton in 1999 and officially became the University of Northampton in 2005. The university also recently underwent a major move to be closer to the town of Northampton, building their new Waterside campus, which opened in 2018. Today, the university offers a wide range of both undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of disciplines.

INSTITUTION TYPE:
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

LOCATION:
NORTHAMPTON,
UNITED KINGDOM

ORGANIZATION SIZE:
14,000+

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:
Anthology Illuminate,
Blackboard





The Challenge

Ensuring Student Engagement in a Smaller Scale, Personalized Experience

When building their new campus, the University of Northampton made the extraordinary decision not to construct any large lecture halls on campus. “The vice chancellor wanted everything to be blended learning and small group teaching and didn’t feel that lectures were the way to go, that they weren’t pedagogically effective,” said Robert Farmer, learning technology manager at University of Northampton. “The whole university’s strategy is based on active blended learning, where students are taught in small groups on campus.” Farmer described this approach as a “much more small scale, personal experience.”

This type of learning experience requires a lot of data to fully understand how, and to what extent, students are engaging with their individual courses and with their learning overall. “The problem we’ve always had is just knowing how people were using the VLE [virtual learning environment],” Farmer explained. “[Instructors] get a lot of information at the end of the year about their courses and their students...but historically, what they haven’t had, because we haven’t had it, is...any information about their courses on the VLE and how they’ve been used, or whether they’ve been used.”



The Solution



“We had very specific things that we wanted to try to find out about, and we were able to get that out of Illuminate.”

Robert Farmer

*Learning Technology Manager,
University of Northampton*

Easy-to-Find Insights

As longtime users of Anthology® Blackboard, the team at Northampton was excited to leverage Anthology® Illuminate, Anthology’s comprehensive shared data and reporting platform, to gather, interpret, and make use of the data about students’ engagement with courses from Blackboard. “With Illuminate, the main goal was to just start looking at the interrelationship between good course design and levels of student interaction,” said Farmer. “We were really hoping to see what we could find out about those two things.”

And find out they did. Some of the specific metrics they focused on included total number of courses in Blackboard, the number of interactions within a course, and overall time spent on a course. “It’s really given us more of an understanding of how courses are being used,” Farmer said. “Illuminate allows us to zoom out from that micro to more of a macro level.”

Farmer also emphasized the ease with which his team was able to begin using Illuminate right away. “When we first started using Illuminate, it was great because we could get the stuff we wanted really easily,” he said. “If you were a big institution and you had your own data lakes and whizzy developers, you could maybe have done this kind of stuff. But what’s great about Illuminate is Anthology [has] done all the stuff that would have been really difficult for us to do...this got all the information we need.” He added, speaking to the ease of use of Illuminate, “You don’t have to know any SQL...no tricky coding or reports or anything like that.”



Celebrating Good Practice

Armed with up-to-date data about the courses and student engagement, Northampton wanted to use it in a decidedly positive way. “For our [Blackboard] courses, it’s been great because we can start looking at things that look interesting from a data point of view, and that does help us uncover good practice,” Farmer said. “The mission is to celebrate the good practice.”

The university has established the annual Ultra Course Awards, which are given out to instructors who excel in course design. As a result, instructors who receive these awards have been seen as leaders in digital teaching and learning on campus, and others have sought them out for advice and best practices. The university has also asked some of these instructors to run sessions for their colleagues, showcasing their courses and sharing what techniques they’ve used to design them and keep student engagement high.

Farmer and his team have been leveraging Illuminate data in connection with the Ultra Course Awards. One of the steps they’ve taken is to compare engagement levels in award-winning courses to baseline levels of engagement across the university, finding that awarded courses consistently yield higher rates of student involvement. In Farmer’s view, this demonstrates how technology enhances good teaching, but doesn’t replace it. “It was about [the instructor] being a good teacher and putting good pedagogical practices into place in their Blackboard courses as well,” he said. And he stressed that this positive approach is key to using data from Illuminate, as well as to getting buy-in across campus: “We use it as an excuse to go and track down and celebrate the good practice. That’s what’s been fun about it from a Northampton point of view...if this was just going around chasing up people and giving people a hard time, it would not have been enjoyable at all. What’s

made it fun is that purpose of, let's find the good stuff. That's where we want to spend our time. Which is what got all the staff on board with it as well."

Farmer and his team have only begun to embrace all the possibilities Illuminate has to offer. Some of their future goals include sharing out data about groups of courses with the relevant departments on campus, who are better able to interpret and utilize that data; encouraging departments and instructors to cross-reference student grades with student engagement data; providing instructors with more data about their courses at the end of the year, benchmarked against the university average; and making use of Illuminate's AI Design Assistant Adoption report to see how widely that tool is being leveraged across campus.

And stakeholders on campus are certainly seeing the value of this data as well. Farmer shared, "Because we've done this project, one of the deputy deans in I think our largest faculty has actually found this quite interesting and wants to work with us more."



"Institutions rightly spend a lot of money on VLEs, and the more we understand how they're used and who's using them, well, I think that can only be good."

Robert Farmer

*Learning Technology Manager,
University of Northampton*





Epilogue

Already, Farmer would recommend Illuminate to colleagues. “I would definitely encourage anybody who’s using [Blackboard] to get reasonably friendly with Illuminate, because it’s not that difficult to use,” he said. “We can understand much more about how people are using the learning environment.” He also advises going in with specific questions that you want answered, and then finding those answers in the data. “Have an idea of what you want to know, and that’s a much more helpful starting point,” he said.

“I would always recommend Illuminate. It’s a great out-of-the-box thing. It’s what most people have wanted: a high-level reporting feature.”



Robert Farmer

Learning Technology Manager, University of Northampton

With their unique teaching and learning philosophy, University of Northampton is paying close attention to the data to ensure that their learners are getting the best possible experience. And as they continue to dig deeper into that data with Illuminate, no doubt that experience will only continue to improve.



Interested in learning more about how you can unlock the power of connected institutional data? [Learn more about Illuminate now.](#)

Products highlighted in this success story:

Anthology Illuminate
Blackboard

Learn more at anthology.com



©2024 Anthology Inc. and its affiliates. All rights reserved.