EducationCity.com

Interviewed: Kathryn Marchant, Marketing Manager

EducationCity.com[1] is a modular multimedia online learning resource used by over 11,000 schools and 10,000 home subscribers. Subjects covered include maths, literacy, science and foreign languages. Across the UK and North America, over 1 million pupils use it to access over 2 million educational activities a week.

Kathryn Marchant, Marketing Manager of EducationCity.com says it uses federated access management (FAM) to manage access to it. The main driver for implementing FAM was 'to increase penetration of EducationCity.com within schools', she says, while the main benefits have been both ease of management and heightened security for end users.

As an example of ease of management, before EducationCity.com was Shibboleth-enabled, teachers required one password to get into their VLE and then another for EducationCity.com. Now, teachers and pupils in the areas with Single Sign-On just need one password to get into their VLE. They are then recognised by the system and allowed into the EducationCity.com modules they have authority to access.

As for security, Kathryn says, this helps because it is all system-led, 'and you only have one password each to remember. No more post-its around the computer screens!'

PROGRESS

At time of writing, EducationCity.com has undertaken three FAM implementation projects.

'In Lincolnshire EducationCity.com recognises teachers and students individually. Teachers, but not pupils, have access to EducationCity.com's Teacher Features and if a pupil saves their score in the SuccessTracker module (which records data on all of the activities, tests and homework that pupils complete so that class and pupil performance and progress reports can easily be viewed), the system knows which profile to save it to without being told. In the embc region[2] and Worcestershire EducationCity.com gives teachers access to the Teacher Features, but does not identify which pupil is using it at any time. Therefore, if pupils want to save their score, they have to identify themselves by class and name – click on Save Score, find their class from their school's class list, and find themselves within it.'

'Lincolnshire has the slightly better model – by recognising each pupil, it removes the margin for error when saving scores, and as there are less steps to saving scores, it is more time-efficient for users.'

In managerial terms, the process was quite simple. Kathryn says: 'As a relatively small company, with just two principal stakeholders, the sign-off process was quite straightforward, especially as the Managing Director was on board from the outset.' Subsequently it was the Managing Director and EducationCity's Advanced Applications Team that drove the implementation. (Kathryn explains that: 'The team is an in-house team of eight very talented programmers, the head of whom has been with the company since it began 10 years ago, and so has an absolute wealth of experience!')

1   http://www.educationcity.com
2   This includes Derbyshire, Leicester City, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire and Rutland.

www.ukfederation.org.uk

BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

Technologically, some barriers remained.

'To ensure the customer experience remained smooth, we required some non-planned development. Our team found the Shibboleth software not wholly appropriate to link into our current authentication process, as using it would require us to buy an extra server. As we had the expertise in-house, we decided to re-code some of the process ourselves to remove the need for this extra investment. As a result, we were able to integrate the amended Shibboleth software with other software on one of our existing servers, without the risk of it having a negative impact.'

Otherwise, Kathryn says EducationCity had 'the usual resource/time issues' – the work was performed in-house and so had to be done on top of the usual day to day tasks faced by the company. Despite all that, she says, 'integration with our existing product has been achieved with more development effort.'

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The decision was made to implement FAM in-house because EducationCity's Advanced Applications Team, which drives through all EducationCity.com's technical developments, already had the technical expertise: therefore it was available in-house. The team acquired the required knowledge by extensive research into the published standards and specifications of Shibboleth and SAML.

The process, says Kathryn, was still 'challenging, due to the new technology. Shibbolising EducationCity.com involved learning a new infrastructure, absorbing and using new specifications, and integrating them with our own systems.'

Would they do it differently if they had a second chance?

'It's too early to say ... It took the amount of time we thought it would, but becomes progressively easier with each new project. So we are looking forward to the next!'

FUTURE PLANS

EducationCity intends to continue integrating with FAM 'as and when our customers require it.'

Meanwhile, the local authority sales teams are busy sharing the benefits Lincolnshire, Worcestershire and the embc region have experienced by adopting federated access management.

Thanks to Kathryn Marchant for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study.