

Epping Forest College

Digital Voice Experts (DVX): a student-staff partnership to develop digital capabilities (December 2016)

Summary

Epping Forest College's Digital Voice Xpert (DVX) initiative helps staff and learners make better-informed and more creative use of digital technologies as 21st century digital citizens. The DVX scheme follows on from the college's 2009 e-mentoring scheme in which learners with digital expertise helped staff and peers get started with technology in learning and teaching. As a result of the success of this earlier scheme, nearly 95% of respondents in a 2016 survey of staff have reported average or above average confidence in using digital technologies in their work. The DVX scheme now aims to raise the level of digital capabilities we need to live, work and learn successfully and responsibly in a digital world to an equivalent level.

Organisation

Epping Forest College is a medium-sized, general further education college in West Essex which provides education and training from ages 14+ to 19+. Striving to transform the lives of its learners through a culture of innovation, creativity and employability, the college has played an active role in the Jisc-supported **Change Agent Network**, a network of colleges and universities using student-staff partnerships to embed technology-related change.

The challenge

Before 2009, Epping Forest College faced challenges in culture and attainment. Part of the response was to engage learners proactively as e-mentors and partners in a drive for quality improvement. After two years, in 2011, the scheme was widened to one e-mentor per course. In total, the scheme involved 74 learner e-mentors and proved to be an effective, ground-up response to upskilling staff in digital skills. As a consequence, Epping Forest was in a strong position in 2014 to meet the fourth FELTAG challenge:

"The entire workforce has to be brought up to speed to fully understand the potential of learning technology."

FELTAG report, March 2014

Since the e-mentoring scheme, the growth in the range of technologies available to learners and teachers, and the improvement in their e-skills, have brought a new challenge to the fore – ensuring that users know how to engage with these tools in a safe, responsible and creative way. The ability to use digital tools to best effect underpins so much that matters in the modern world, from future employability to effective lifelong learning. So improving the digital capabilities of the college community has become a priority at Epping Forest College alongside the continuing drive to embed digital technologies in learning and teaching:

"The sheer volume of information out there means we have to enable our students to thrive in this globalised, digitalised world. The tools keep on coming so you are never finished if all you focus on is teaching people how to use particular technologies. The important thing is knowing how not to use them."

Vikki Liogier, head of digital literacy, voice and innovation, Epping Forest College

The solution (and how to get there)

Epping Forest College's digital literacy, voice and innovation team, which has led the DVX project from the outset, sees good planning, effective communication and authentic business processes as essential for a successful partnership-for-change project. The team have identified the following steps as key:

- 1. Funding: you will need to offer training, support and incentives for participants. This can only be achieved with a budget agreed by senior managers.**

At Epping Forest College, senior managers agree a budget which enables the college's digital literacy, voice and innovation team to support the DVX scheme.

- 2. Communication: having secured funding, make sure all learners know about the role and what it entails. Use a range of media to get the message out.**

New students first learn about the DVX role at induction. The opportunity continues to be promoted through the year by means of **advertisements** and **presentations** on the college's internal TV network, and through

postings on Twitter [#DigitalVoiceXpert], Facebook and the virtual learning environment. Once in post, the DVXs themselves produce **videos and resources** on topics such as e-safety and plagiarism which are shared with the college community via **YouTube**.

3. Application: use a formal application process as this gives learners vital experience in applying for work.

Applicants for the DVX role receive a formal job description, including an explanation of how candidates will be selected and rewarded. Before being called to interview, shortlisted applicants must confirm their willingness to give up two hours a week to support staff and learners by showcasing good practice, and to participate in three focus groups a year.

4. Interviews: selection by interview ensures the right people are chosen.

Would-be DVXs are then interviewed by the digital literacy, voice and innovation team to ensure they have the right commitment, interests and skills. In addition, the 2016 interviewees were asked to describe a project they would undertake, making use of their particular interests and skills in digital media to assist others. To showcase their presentational skills, they were also asked to make a one-minute video about themselves.

5. In-role incentives: everyone performs better if they feel appreciated.

Once in post, the DVXs receive ten hours of training a year, a certificate of participation and a reference for future employers as well as having a range of opportunities to develop their personal skills. Having collected evidence of their achievements on the job, all DVXs receive termly incentive vouchers, with bonuses for the best performers. At end of the year awards ceremonies, DVXs who have made the most impact can win an iPad or receive an additional cash prize.

6. Support and training: factor in time to support learners in presentational and time management skills, as well as training them in pedagogically effective use of digital technologies.

A small team under the leadership of the head of digital literacy, voice and innovation provides advice, training and support to learners taking up the DVX role, including guidance on the pedagogic value of digital technologies in teaching and learning.

7. Making the most of opportunities: learners gain skills and experience from participating in a wide variety of college enterprises.

DVXs also get involved in the wider activities the college runs to keep learner motivation high. An example is a **Dragons' Den competition** launched in the college's employability week in November. This event invites all learners to put forward ideas to improve learning, teaching and assessment through digital technologies. Other college-wide competitions have included a **presentation on e-safety** in a range of visual media. The DVXs play a role in promoting these competitions and encouraging their peers to apply. They also formally represent their fellow learners in consultations and can feed into college decision-making on technology use and procurement.

Outcomes

The college currently supports ten DVXs who are working to establish the importance of digital capabilities by creating presentations on e-safety and research skills, offering peer-to-peer guidance and leadership on social media, and by providing feedback to the college from a learner perspective. In addition, the DVX team continues to provide an e-mentoring role for teachers across the college, researching skills gaps and creating 'how-tos' to assist staff with unfamiliar tools. In the process, they are subtly changing the culture of the college:

"The roles of students and staff have changed. Information is out there and the teacher is now a facilitator and questioner. The role of student is also changing."

Vikki Liogier, head of digital literacy, voice and innovation, Epping Forest College

The scheme has clear advantages for the DVXs as well. Participants not only develop their employability and personal skills but also grow in confidence while in the role:

"Being part of the DVX scheme has been a wonderful experience. Not only did I get the chance to strengthen my communication and team working skills but also enjoyed working together with lovely staff members and other student DVX's."

DVX, Epping Forest College

The college in turn has the benefit of the ideas, talents and inspiration only learners can bring to a project. Future learners and staff can equally benefit from the legacy of their work. For example, by recording examples of good practice on video, the current DVX team has ensured that effective models of digital practice are not lost when staff and learners leave the college:

"From when I heard about the opportunity, I thought about what I could do to help out current students and came up with the idea of 'Insight'. This web series would look into how students prepared and progressed through a

project/assignment. Since I've started, I've filmed and published three episodes on Planet eStream."

DVX, Epping Forest College

Tips for effective practice

- Start with a clear project plan and a job description
- Make full use of the insights your learner partners provide – for example, what works well and what is less effective
- Encourage your learner partners to pursue their own personal projects while in role in order to tap into their enthusiasm for particular themes or technologies
- Listen to what they have to tell you. Don't force them to do something they are not interested in
- Recognise and celebrate their achievements
- Manage their expectations but also stress the benefits that will ensue. Learners invariably gain valuable personal, employability as well as technical skills from taking up these partnership roles

Find out more

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Read more about the Epping Forest College DVX scheme:

www.linkedin.com/pulse/student-digital-voice-xpert-programme-efc-vikki-liogier