Harlow College

Engagement is the key to success (May 2016)

Summary

Harlow College has put learners at the heart of its plans to develop an effective digital learning and teaching environment.

Through provision of iPads to every learner, judicious selection of apps to support learning and investment in developing staff and student digital skills, the college is making good progress towards developing independent learners who are well equipped for the world of work. The development of an emerging digital ambassadors programme that harnesses the enthusiasm of learners to encourage their peers to engage with online learning is putting more control into the hands of learners to shape their own learning experiences.

The challenge

Harlow College is an FE college with a strong sixth form and BTEC offer and provision for higher education through Anglia Ruskin University. It offers a diverse range of courses to 4,000 learners and apprentices. The college is making science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) a major focus for development and it is building an advanced manufacturing and engineering centre to support this. It also has a long-standing reputation for its media courses, including photography and journalism.

After a period of several years, during which the college's priorities emphasised target setting and development of unit days of study rather than digital technologies, the college wanted to experiment with blended learning supported by technology to enable it to offer a more personalised and effective learning experience for every learner.

Solution

The arrival in 2013 of new principal Karen Spencer, and then the appointment of Charlotte Creagh as innovation manager and Dave Monk as e-learning co-ordinator, kick-started the introduction of blended learning.

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Karen has made digital technologies a key part of the college's mission. Following her experience with **KUBE**, a proven framework for developing blended learning in HE at her previous college, she was keen to explore this in the context of winning funding for a **Learning Futures** project which developed the Kube framework in the context of 16 – 18 year old full-time learners on vocational programmes in business and media. The Learning Futures project also enabled the college to start a pilot, providing iPads for every learner and member of staff on these programmes.

Spurred on by the success of the pilot, every full-time learner on an FE programme at Harlow College is now provided with an iPad when they start. Dave explains:

"The iPads open up all sorts of opportunities for new, flexible ways of learning and for more independent working. Students like that, and getting them to engage is really one of the most important things we can do to give them the best chance to succeed."

The iPads are pre-loaded with the apps that each learner will need, and these have been carefully selected by the college for ease of use and functionality. Key apps include the collaborative tool **Padlet**, interactive classroom tool **Nearpod** and community creation tool **Showbie** – these were the first to be embedded, and the college is now exploring the value of others such as **iMovie** for video creation and sharing to see how these can best be put to use on learning programmes. Other apps proving popular include **Kahoot!** which is being used to provide quizzes on various programmes including GCSE Maths and English. Learners like it because it is fun, it doesn't "name and shame" people who don't score well, but it gives teachers an opportunity to spot that there are some learners among the group who would benefit from a recap. **Socrative** is another, giving learners activities that they can do interactively in class but also in their own time so that teachers can assess progress and target classroom time to better effect.

Learners are also free to download their own apps, within acceptable parameters, although paying for these (where necessary) is the responsibility of the individual. This has clear potential to engage students. Equally important, though, is encouragement from digital enthusiasts and in the first year of the programme one particular student on the business course became a very proactive advocate taking on the role of digital ambassador to encourage more reluctant learners to use their iPads imaginatively.

In addition, the college uses **Office 365** which enables teachers and learners to file and share their work; this was selected for its functionality and also because the college already uses Microsoft products.

Teachers need to be comfortable with the technology too, and the college bought in initial and on-going training as part of the package from its iPad supplier. All regular staff training days now include an element of further iPad training.

Harlow College is keen to recruit more digital ambassadors from among the student community and is working on ways to encourage more students to come forward and take on the role. At the same time, it is developing a number of digital leaders from among the staff to play a proactive role in taking staff digital skills forward.

Impact

» It is too soon to quote measurable impacts on achievement but there is strong anecdotal evidence that learners are more willing to work in their own time, and are developing important independent learning skills such as research – 85% of students surveyed (300 students) this year say that the iPads are helping them with their work

» Staff digital skills have improved rapidly

» The college is equipping learners with digital skills that they'll need in the workplace – the college student survey shows that 60% of learners expect this of their college

» An Ofsted inspection in early 2016 highlights the effective use of tablets to enable independent working and easy access to course and research materials

Key points

Dave Monk's tips for engaging learners in the development of the digital environment:

» Take a top-down approach – a large-scale programme of development needs buy-in from the executive; Harlow College lost some momentum with digital technology a few years ago when it less of a high priority for senior managers

» Be clear about what you need technology to do before making any investment decisions

» Develop a sound digital strategy – Harlow developed its strategy from scratch, with advice from Jisc, among others

» Don't neglect the implications for digital literacy of staff and students; it will be necessary to invest in developing these

» Go to sector events and talk to other colleges to share experiences, challenges, successes and failures. Learn from people who are on the same journey

» Don't under-estimate the power of students to drive forward adoption of new technologies by their peers

More information

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Dave Monk, e-learning development co-ordinator, Harlow College
Email: **dmonk@harlow-college.ac.uk**
Learning futures interactive toolkit **http://lfuturesnews.co.uk/kube**