South Staffordshire College

Thought leadership interview with Jamie Smith, director of strategy and infrastructure (May 2016)

"I'm not a technology evangelist, I'm a people evangelist"

Jamie has more than 20 years' experience in education, specialising in strategy, innovation and technology-enhanced learning. He is often thought of as a technology evangelist but he takes issue with that: "I'm a people evangelist – I'm only interested in technology that makes life better for people".

Tell us about your college

South Staffordshire College is an FE college with over 10,000 students working across four campuses, mostly on a wide range of work-based courses and apprenticeships, although we offer higher education programmes as well.

The college is adapting to meet the changing needs of learners and employers in the digital age and we are making strategic investments to transform learning spaces and creating new specialist centres such as advanced manufacturing and technology hubs. A new AgriSTEM Academy is due to open in September 2016 that will offer state-of-the-art facilities for students on many of our most popular courses including land based technology, agriculture, advanced engineering and automotive engineering.

Why is digital important for the college? What is your vision for digital?

The strategy across all our operations is "digital by default". We pick and choose the technologies we adopt very carefully and any technology must be simple to use and make life better. Our mission is about transforming the life chances of the communities we serve, and to support this any technology must meet those two criteria.

Out of the thousands of apps available to all of us, most people will only have about ten on their phone or tablet that they use regularly. They'll have chosen those because they do something really helpful and they are easy to use. That kind of technology is the only kind I'm interested in because it will have an impact.

Before I back any new technology I have to be assured that it's simple to use and make life and work better for people.

What benefits are you realising through the use of technology – to learners, staff and core business?

The main benefits for students and teachers are that they can be more social in the way they work and they can collaborate more easily. Introducing **Google Apps for Education** (an integrated communication and collaboration solution) was probably the single most important technological innovation for us. Students can work together either on their own devices or on the 200+ Chromebase computing devices that we have installed in the college's learning resource centres. They can make better use of their time by getting on with assignments on the bus or wherever else they have some spare time and this all means that they are engaging actively with their learning and developing some important team-working employability skills.

Our teaching staff are using **Google Chromebook**s to help them create and access all their teaching resources as well as students' work easily. Whilst Google Apps for Education can be accessed on any device (all you need is an internet connection) a Chromebook is a superb, cost-effective solution for teachers that makes their lives better.

From a business perspective, we're all about people, so if our teams are working to the best of their ability and achieving well, then our business is working successfully. But in purely financial terms, digital technology is making it possible for us to save money and work a lot smarter also. For example, we've put 200 ChromeBase machines into our learning resource centres; they boot up in less than five seconds, require little to no maintenance, never slow down and they use 60-80% less energy than the older computers they replace. In a college that may have around 2,000 or so computers, based on current energy prices and typical energy consumption of those devices, there is the potential to save about £35k a year on energy costs alone.

It's also been very good for our reputation to have been nominated for several awards for innovative digital practice, including a TES FE Award.

How is your digital strategy being implemented?

Change is a process not an event, and to enable positive change education leaders need to create the right culture where people can thrive and love what they do. A part of that is making sure that any developments genuinely make things better for people. Get that right and engagement takes care of itself.

Strategies are all well and good, and necessary in certain contexts, but they are part planned and part emergent. People will engage with a digital strategy if they believe in the vision and why it matters. To achieve that, it must matter to them, and that's why our digital strategy is people-driven, not technology-led.

Have there been any barriers to take up of technology by staff?

Teaching staff have been enthusiastic about using devices like a Chromebook, not least because they can help with mundane problems as well, like getting registers marked. This is much easier through a portable device like a Chromebook, which just connects to the wifi. Every teacher knows how frustrating it can be to have limited access to key systems.

We run 'changing education technology for the better' events regularly with our partners **Vitalize** and Google, and these events are free to attend and open to staff from across education. This is important as it nurtures innovation through the cross-pollination of different ideas and expertise.

We also run "Google Days" for staff to ensure colleagues are confident in using technology such as simple things like Gmail and Google Drive, but also more advanced applications. Colleagues who have taken part quickly went way beyond what we expected and were soon doing some relatively advanced work, which was great to see.

This was possible because the technology is intuitive, making it easy for teaching staff to work more effectively and save themselves time as well.

We keep providing training and refreshers for staff and we make sure that colleagues' achievements are celebrated and rewarded. When they do something innovative it is shared across the college. We use open, social and collaborative tools for this like the Google+ communities facility.

Jamie's tips for developing a vision for digital technology in your institution:

»   Make sure you have the right culture – shared goals and a co-created vision

»   Identify where you want your college to get to, and decide how to get there with the primary focus on people, not technology

»   Make it a team effort – not a top down approach

» Find simple solutions that work

» Be open and honest about your challenges

» Enable people to innovate with a fail-fast, learn-fast culture

» Create open, social and collaborative platforms

More information

Watch Jamie's **TEDx talk "Education in the digital age"**

Contact Jamie by email: **Jamie.Smith@southstaffordshire.ac.uk** or Twitter @SocialBusiness9