Portland College

Mobile tech boosts student progression (May 2016)

Summary

Mobile and video technologies are being used to boost the confidence and employability of students with disabilities at Portland College. To reflect the changing needs and aspirations of students, the college has established a new learning centre that focuses on mobile learning, which is enabling more students to use mobile devices in the curriculum. Students are gaining confidence in using tablets in their learning and they are increasingly able to exploit digital media to demonstrate their skills and achievements to employers.

The challenge

Portland College is an independent specialist college for students aged 16 to 25, providing educational opportunities and fostering independent living skills for students with physical or learning disabilities. The college also offers a range of residential and day programmes for unemployed adults with disabilities that include courses designed to support progress into work.

Students with a disability often find it difficult to show what they can do in an interview setting and their self-esteem and confidence can be damaged when things don't go well. College trials of mobile and video technologies had shown that these could be used to help overcome the problem but using mobile devices was a fundamental change in practice that could become an extra hurdle in an already challenging situation.

Nonetheless, college staff believed that mobile technologies would bring a range of benefits, helping students to become independent learners, finding out and memorising information, and putting into practice new or rediscovered skills with far less reliance on their teachers.

Staff knew the resulting increase in students' confidence and self-esteem would enable them to see their teachers as guides and confidence builders rather than as instructors. Portability was another clear advantage. Many learning activities at Portland are practical and work-oriented, often occurring on the college farm far from the classroom and mobile devices would enable classroom support to go wherever the students do. In addition, support could be personalised to meet the different needs and preferences of individual students.

The solution

Confidence in using mobile devices only comes with repeated exposure so Portland College set up the Quick campus project to enable more use of mobile devices in learning activities. The Quick campus project has funded:

» Wi-fi coverage across the college farm

» 28 iPad Minis

» A 'sync and charge' solution for mobile devices

» Specialised assistive technologies to help individual students and staff

The farm became the focal point for the project. Learning activities on the farm lend themselves easily to the use of mobile devices – a student needing advice on how to fix a lawnmower, for example, can find the manual or a maintenance video online via a tablet and they can use the same device to record photographic evidence of their work to upload to an e-portfolio.

They can scan QR codes to find out how to use a piece of machinery. In the lawn-mowing scenario, codes printed on the mower could enable the student to find information on how to empty it, refuel and check the oil levels or investigate health and safety regulations.

In creative studies, students are using tablets to record videos that explain the thinking and purpose behind their artwork. The activity encourages students to think about their work and decide how best to present it, helping them learn the skills of reflection and presentation that are so important in the world of work.

This is just the start. College staff are finding more avenues opening up as a result of the mobile learning project. Students are participating willingly in ICT sessions that were previously seen as unnecessary or not of interest. The college has run sessions on digital editing to make the content of students' videos more concise and audience-aware so that they can share their e-portfolio content with more confidence. And there are plans to produce on-the-fly guidance videos to aid students in using tools on the farm or in the motor mechanics workshop, and to capture information on plants and animals.

The biggest success story so far is the use of the iPad Minis in the curriculum. These devices are used regularly to:

» Record stills, audio and video to document students' progress

» Screen assessments and record achievements for e-portfolios. For many students, providing alternatives to the written essay aids communication and helps them make progress on an assessed course

» Vote in group discussions to express views and opinions

» Develop relationships with classmates and teachers when communication by any other means is challenging

» Increase students' engagement with their individual learning plans

» Aid reflection and share achievements with external audiences

Impact

The impact on student employability is still being assessed but enabling students to capture and record their achievements has clearly increased their potential to succeed, both as learners and as prospective employees.

Key points

Portland College's tips for using mobile technology to develop learners' employability:

» Ensure that you have good internet connectivity across your campus or estate

» Engage students and staff with the benefits that using mobile devices will enable

» Invest in developing the digital skills of staff and students

» Explore tools that can help students to refine and improve their work, such as video editing

More information

Web: portland.ac.uk