

Chapter 15

E–Mentors: A Case Study in Effecting Cultural Change

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ABSTRACT

The eMentors scheme encapsulates the concept that the person in the home most likely to be able to programme the audio-visual equipment is the teenager. The scheme harnesses the digital generation's propensity for technology by using the students to teach their teachers how to make appropriate use of electronic resources in the classroom. We present a case study that focuses on both staff and student experiences of the eMentoring system at a further education college in Hertfordshire, UK and outlines the strategy for ongoing staff development and support. The scheme has given lecturers the confidence to develop new technology-enhanced pedagogical practices and has given students the opportunity to play an active part in the development of their own learning environments and to influence policy on the use of technology. We believe that this model has been an effective element in a concerted approach to changing the prevailing attitudes to designing pedagogy for 21st century learners.

INTRODUCTION

Learning technology is spreading rapidly within further education (FE) and teachers are expected to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into their pedagogy. This necessitates huge investment most significantly in staff development and support. It is imperative that we recognise the ubiquitous incursion of

technology into every aspect of our lives which necessitates a response from educational institutions whose role it is to prepare students for further study and employment. According to Abowd and Mynatt (2000) 'The proliferation of computing into the physical world promises more than the ubiquitous availability of computing infrastructure; it suggests new paradigms of interaction inspired by constant access to information and computational capabilities' (p. 29)

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At first it seems that teaching staff are resistant to the incursion of technology into the learning environment, however it is teachers' pedagogical beliefs that mediate their integration. (Ertmer, 2005; Donnelly & O'Rourke, 2007) 'few academics or teachers have all the necessary skills, or either the time or the desire to acquire them' (Salmon, 2002, p. 5). Any programme that sets out to address teachers' use of learning technologies needs to address the pedagogic issues, inspire and enthuse and give teachers the skills to implement these technologies into their methodology. To address this situation the college has developed a range of responses and we report, on one of those support systems: the eMentors programme. This system uses the students to teach the teachers how to use technology appropriately and aims to exploit the situation that students can take on the role of technical support at the point of need.

Oaklands College is a Further Education College in the UK. It delivers education to approximately 11,000 students supported by about 600 staff; just over half of the student population is in the 15 to 18 age group. The learners are enrolled on a range of courses including vocational and work-based; Adult and Community Learning; and academic to degree level professional courses. The college also caters for pupils drawn from local schools on vocational courses, and learners following modern apprenticeships.

This predominantly vocational curriculum requires the education of students to take place in classrooms and workshops within the college and real life settings outside. The college accepts students from a wide variety of social contexts and its mission is to provide 'outstanding learning opportunities and training solutions within a vibrant, inclusive College experience, leading to recognised qualifications and outcomes that contribute to personal development, and the economic growth and social well-being of our community' (Oaklands, 2009).

The college vision separates technology from e-learning: an important distinction that is reflected

in the senior management hierarchy with a Director of Estates being responsible for Information Technology operation and support and a Director of E-learning, a post that is part of the curriculum structure, responsible for the use of that technology in the classroom, workshop and beyond.

The e-learning and technology vision (Everett 2008, p. 3) documents an entitlement to students that they will get a 'better technology experience than at home' aiming to deliver 'bleeding edge learning' utilising 'leading edge technology'. It should be noted that it also emphasises the concept of 'education requirements driving technology' and e-learning 'enhancing the learning experience', both aspects underpinning the rationale behind the whole eMentors concept.

The eMentors programme plays an integral part in a concerted programme of staff development and support designed to implement culture change. FE teachers often have large workloads, and this often impacts upon the adoption of, or even resistance to, new technology and attendance at professional development sessions. Students on the other hand, have strong intrinsic motivation to use new technology and have experience in its use.

BACKGROUND

For the effective use of learning technologies, it is generally recognised that educators have to integrate those technologies into a new personal pedagogical practice (Donnelly & O'Rourke, 2007; Jackson & Anagnostopoulou, 2001). However, this endeavour is unlikely to make progress if educators have a fear or lack sufficient knowledge of, the basic underlying technologies. Most institutions provide some form of initial training or staff development on the introduction of new technology (Laurillard, 1993). But this is rarely sufficient to overcome all staff anxieties. Most lecturers require more IT support than their institutions provide (Mason & Rennie, 2006). This is not surprising; education is largely a real-time

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