Cornwall College: Creating a NEET technology-enhanced learning space

Summary

Cornwall College have developed technology-rich learning spaces for NEETs, (not in education, employment or training) and pre-16 learners, which is helping to transform Foundation Learning. Through the use of iPads and the introduction of a Big Brother-style diary room, learners have access to a much more immersive and engaging learning environment than before. The technology is helping to not only enthuse NEETs and learners, but give them ownership of their learning in a positive way.

Before and after: the classroom on the left, with square tables and a whiteboard and the updated learning space on the right, with interactive whiteboard, round tables and computers

About Cornwall College

Cornwall College is the county's largest education and training provider. They support 35,000 learners of all ages each year, 2,000 of whom are studying at university level.

They have had over 10,000 apprentices in the past ten years makes, which makes them the most successful provider of apprenticeships in South West England.
The challenge

NEETs are young people that have been disengaged at school, and find the traditional classroom environment difficult to engage with. For a number of reasons, many NEETs have left school without any qualifications or the opportunity to find employment. Therefore, one of the main challenges for Cornwall College was to find a way to re-engage with NEETs as well as break the cycle of behavioural problems in class and to improve retention and attendance.

At the Foundation Learning and pre-16s centre at the college, staff were tasked with finding new ways of trying to get NEETs to be more involved in their learning. Reversing the mind-set of NEETs and breaking the mould of the traditional classroom, was something of a real challenge, as Vicky Cox, Cluster Director for Foundation Learning, explains:

“The most challenging aspect to delivering to NEETs and that kind of cohort of learners is their engagement and motivation, it’s not to say that they are unmotivated, everybody has a motivation, it’s just about finding that motivation. Sometimes they’ve lost their way; it can take time to get to the point where they are ready to truly learn.”

Alongside the introduction of new digital technologies and learning spaces, the Foundation Learning team also faced additional challenges, such as:

- Staff training on using smart devices and media equipment
- Adopting new teaching styles utilising technology
- Working in a new learning space and finding how best to use that space
- Changing the delivery method of teaching NEETs

The activity

As part of the research into the types of activities, technologies and learning spaces, Vicky and her team reviewed the curriculum and went back to look at the previous academic year to evaluate each of the courses within Foundation Learning. This enabled them to find out what the issues were and explore how they could better develop systems and start to create a plan of the kind of learning space that would best suit the needs of their learners.

Following on from feedback from NEETs and learners, the Foundation Learning team explored their assessment methods and also what their preferred learning styles were.

iPads and other types of technology, like Augmented Reality (AR) were explored as the types of technologies that NEETs would find more interesting and engaging.
“So we’ve looked a lot at using the idea of augmented reality and using new technology within iPads and other tablets to really enthuse our learners, so they’re learning through doing, they’re learning through putting something together that they then share with others.” - Vicky Cox, Cluster Director for Foundation Learning, Cornwall College

One of the other things that Vicky did was to give each of her teams a blank piece of paper and ask them to write down what their course is about and what they think their learners get out of the course. Learners were also asked the same questions to find out what they thought they had got out of their courses and Vicky found that there was a difference between what the learners got out of the courses and what the team wanted them to get from the courses.

The learners were then asked to design what they would want their learning environment to look like including the kind of room features they wanted, such as:

- Plants
- Sofas
- Smartboards
- TVs
- round tables

“They came up with very mature ideas that we hadn’t given them credit for necessarily, which changed some of the perceptions of staff about NEETs and about that behaviour and how to manage it.” - Vicky Cox, Cluster Director for Foundation Learning, Cornwall College

The Foundation Learning team were keen to move away from the traditional classroom with square tables and standard whiteboard as well as the preaching and teaching style of delivery traditionally provided by tutors.

Another area of development for the Foundation Learning team has been a Big Brother-style diary room. This room is a space where NEETs can use to track how they are feeling and take part in activities, much like the Big Brother television programme. The room is also a means to track and assess NEETs and learners, including the opportunity to help invigorate the curriculum through activities, much like the ones in the television programme. So there may be a brown envelope waiting for the NEETs left on the Big Brother chair. NEETs are also encouraged to use the camera equipment and use technology to review and record activities.

The outcomes

Learners now own their learning environment because they have been directly involved in its design. This has helped to improve behaviour and attendance for pre-16s and NEETs and make them more interested in learning.

“Everything in there is like a hundred times better than it was last year, even the way the classrooms are set out, everyone’s got an iPad working and you can chill and work, so it’s like relaxing.” – Cornwall College NEET
One of the reasons why it has been successful is because learners are provided and allowed to use their smartphones in the classroom as well as a range of other immersive tools, as Vicky explains:

“They’re part of a two-way dialogue using technology, which is how our learners do discuss and do debate with each other now, that’s how they interact and communicate and what they are doing is they are using their first choice of communication, which generally is social media or text messaging or using the phone or video to communicate with each other and it puts them at ease, so it means that they are engaged.”

Breaking that mould of how teaching should look and be is something that the Foundation Learning team have been keen to do.

“I think it’s a new approach, the guys who we’ve got going in the classrooms have seen a similar kind of classroom all their lives, they’ve gone through primary, secondary and now on to us at an FE college and it’s giving that different approach which helps to give them a different perspective on what education is.” - David Price, Group Lead for Learning Support – Learning & Teaching, Cornwall College.

Another aspect for the success of the project has been redefining the rules, so instead of enforcing NEETs and learners to abide by strict rules when a tutor is delivering a class, there are specific areas where NEETs and learners can go to talk and relax on a sofa to work, so it’s very much a versatile learning environment.
NEETs and learners also have access to more technology as well as teachers, for being able to deliver a more immersive experience and one that is not narrowly defined through using textbooks and a whiteboard. Tutor Nick Pugliese has noticed changes in the behaviour of his learners, as he highlights below:

“I’ve definitely noticed that they seem to interact more in the lesson, with their peers and with the tutors, it’s refreshing to see; it’s definitely been beneficial compared to previous academic years, I’ve noticed a marked improvement.”

**The impact**

The impact of the redeveloped learning spaces and the interaction of new technology has seen marked improvements in attendance and enthusiasm of the learners and NEETs. In fact, Vicky has seen even greater impact, as she highlights below:

“The best feedback we’re having is not only full attendance, but attendance before the 9am start time, so the learners are coming in and getting here early. They are also wanting to stay on longer to finish off what they are working on; they enjoy seeing their efforts praised. They also enjoy seeing and getting automatic feedback and response, which is what you can get when you’re using the interactive technology.”

The use of iPads and more mobile-based technology has played a big part in giving NEETs and learners more versatility, so that learning isn’t narrowed down to a classroom, as Tutor Steve Watkinson explains:

“The outdoor learning offers a different experience, so for example, one of the Tuesdays we did a task in the woods and we took the iPads with us and they used the evidence in terms of videos and photos in their assignments, so it’s just given a totally different outlook on learning for them.”

Additional technologies like Augmented Reality have been something that the Foundation Learning team wanted to explore further, so that NEETs and learners have opportunities for continued development. NEETs and learners and also using their own devices in lessons for their coursework rather than for personal reasons.

“We had that new F4 classroom done, which is looking quite nice because before it was just like a plain old classroom. So it’s like a space for us that we can work and if you want to get your head down or need space or tables, you’ve got computers around you and if you’re in a lesson working well, you can put music on and I think it’s just better for all of us really.” – Cornwall College NEET
“There’s an app on the iPad called Aurasma and we’re looking at trying to develop staff knowledge, so we can use that with the students and we can get the students interacting, using and creating their own resources.” – Steph Isaacs, Team Lead for Foundation Learning.

Overall NEETs and learners are benefitting from a much more versatile and engaging learning environment, where technology is playing a leading role in helping to improve behaviour, attendance and retention.

“We are seeing enthusiasm from them and they’re feedback is that this works much better for them than it did last year, they want to be in the environment more, so the feedback is overwhelmingly positive.” - Vicky Cox, Cluster Director for Foundation Learning, Cornwall College

These learning spaces are providing teaching by showing rather than telling, which is something that is helping to flip the traditional ridged mould of teaching and learning for NEETs and pre-16s at Cornwall College.

“I think the fact that they are getting more freedom with their learning rather than telling them what to do, they are out and investigating, so they’ve got a vested interest. Now they are coming back and telling me and showing me the evidence, so it’s turning it around a little bit and it’s giving them a bit of independence towards learning as well, which is where we want to be with the NEETs and pre 16s.” – Steve Watkinson, Tutor, Cornwall College.

The lessons learned

In terms of the timing of the redevelopment of the learning spaces and the introduction of the technology, the Foundation Learning team would have liked the process to have moved a little quicker than it has. This was partly due to managerial restructuring, which impacted on initial ideas and so it took more time to involve staff than previously anticipated.

Useful links

Cornwall College
Jisc RSC South West
Aurasma

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