South Staffordshire College: Innovative, technology rich learning spaces engage students

Summary

Following a refurbishment of one of its campuses, staff at South Staffordshire College introduced new technology-rich learning spaces, featuring state of the art equipment. As a result, the college is benefitting from more engaged students, new assessment methods and ways of working, as well as making time and cost savings.

The 4D immersive room in use
About South Staffordshire College

The college has four campuses, in Lichfield, Cannock, Tamworth and Rodbaston. The college attracts around 12000 learners each year and offers vocational courses, apprenticeships and higher education.

South Staffordshire College has state-of-the-art facilities, using thin-client virtual desktop PCs, the latest projection technologies and immersive learning environments, using bespoke furniture. The college has also made significant investment in mobile devices to enrich the student learning experience, and its Cannock Campus has recently undergone refurbishment to include an immersive 4D environment.

Chris Davies – Director of Curriculum & Support commented: “We are committed to harnessing the best technologies to support innovation and improvement in our curriculum delivery, enabling immersive learning and inspiring teaching.”

The challenge

In 2013, South Staffordshire College completed a refurbishment of its Cannock Campus. Following a recent Ofsted inspection, which saw the college rated as “good”, senior managers wanted to continue pushing the boundaries of technology to create a flagship teaching and learning environment, that is dynamic and engaging and facilitates students using their own devices.

The activity

Director of Strategy and Infrastructure, Jamie Smith, saw a 4D learning space in a school environment and identified similar opportunities for teaching and learning in FE. As a result, the college installed a 4D interactive space, created through LED lighting, giant projection and surround sound. The three elements of the space can be changed to alter the atmosphere, mood and location of the experience.

Jamie says: “The benefits of an engaging, inspiring and immersive learning experience are at the heart of everything the college does, and the 4D learning space is a great example of this, where both teachers and learners can be in their element.”

To facilitate group work and collaborative projects, the college also set up the ‘collaboration room’ – a model based on the University of Wolverhampton’s LaTTE (Learning and Teaching Test Environment), to facilitate small group work.

Steve Wileman, Chief Learning Technologist says, “Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands put us in touch with the University and we toured their LaTTE room - a space where learners have more flexibility in their own learning without the traditional classroom environment. It inspired us to create something similar and with advice from the University, we introduced wi-fi connected, interactive, Epson short
throw projectors which allow learners to utilise their own devices to share content via AirServer. This costs £6 per license compared to the more costly alternative of AppleTV.”

The collaboration room is specifically aimed at group work and facilitates bring your own device (BYOD)

The outcomes

In January 2014, Steve and his colleague Ian Holt, carried out staff development, initially with technology innovators. As the new projectors proved so intuitive to use, sessions took just 20 minutes, whereas previously, staff development for the whiteboards took over an hour.

Steve says, “Interactivity is focused and clear. The feedback from staff was immediately more positive and they were keen to get started with making lessons more engaging. Similarly, staff who have been trained so far on the 4D room have been enthusiastic and have found the software easy to use. All staff need to do is source relevant images, music and/or video and the software does the rest.”
The 4D room software is easy to use and the mood of the environment can be changed at the touch of a button

The 4D room allows tutors to create a fully immersive environment so students can experience a situation, rather than sitting in a classroom trying to imagine it. By changing the lighting and content, the mood of the room can be changed to reflect the subject matter. It has facilitated role-play, debates and more engaging methods of assessment.

Steve says, “We have used the room with Level 3 learners to explore a crime scene, carry out arrests and police interviews, and undertake news reports. It even works well with more traditional subjects such as government and politics. Students were able to visualise the inside of the Houses of Parliament ahead of a scheduled visit.”

He adds, “Similarly with the collaboration room, it has changed the way that the learners are assessed and made learning much more engaging. There are 5 learning pods with large screens, which facilitate peer work and assessment. The use of quizzes, for example, worked well in a recent lesson about politics. Each group was a political party and they were able to share manifestos and votes using their own devices, which displayed content directly to the screens and shared with their peers. The competitive nature of this exercise kept the learners engaged and focused.”

The new projector software is much more accessible than previously used whiteboard tools. Students can highlight items on a document that can then be
saved as a pdf and put onto the Moodle VLE for later reference. There are no longer access issues of having created a mindmap, for example, and a student not being able to access it on a PC because the relevant software isn't installed.

The impact

Although the 4D and collaboration rooms have only been open for 6 months, there are early indications of impact for staff, learners, and the organisation:

- **Time saved** – the Epson Easy Interactive tools projector software is more intuitive and it has taken less time for staff to learn how to use.
- **Cost savings** – the collaboration room, and subsequent rooms that have been modelled on the room, have facilitated bring your own device which could negate the need to purchase as many desktop PCs in the future.
- **Increased confidence amongst learners** – those who typically lack confidence have become so immersed in the 4D room environment that they have lost some of their inhibitions and have become much more engaged.
- **Faster paced lessons** – the use of learners’ own devices to share content is quicker than using USB sticks and moves the lesson along at a faster pace.
- **Re-assessment reduced** – students are more prepared and interested in more engaging assessment methods such as video, resulting in virtually no re-assessments.
- **Number of applications for 2014-15 increased** – prospective learners at open days have been enthused by the new facilities and have heard from existing learners how the technology has made a difference to their learning.
- **More use of flipped learning and independent learning** – learners are taking more ownership of their learning by putting their own content together.

Steve says, “It’s still early days, however the impact that we have seen in such a short space of time is incredible. From September 2014, when more staff have been trained and seen the potential of the new technologies, we will look more at quizzes and other assessment methods that can be incorporated into the 4D room. The feedback that we have had so far from staff has been extremely positive.”

The learner view from Ben Boothman, Level 3 Public Services: “The 4D room has allowed me to see my assignments come to life – we’ve done a number of different things in the 4D room, like crime scene analysis, news reports and police interviews.”

The teacher view from Melanie Wilkes: “We have used the 4D space this year to help us conduct assessments. This has been enjoyed by students - it gets them outside of their preconceived impression of a typical assessment environment. The assessments are fun and engaging.”

The lessons learned

Steve has the following advice for learning providers:
“Try and join up with organisations who are undertaking similar projects and share ideas – it has helped us to save time and money. We have really benefitted from joining up with the University of Wolverhampton via the Jisc Regional Support Centre. If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t have known about the University’s LaTTE room and wouldn’t have benefitted from their advice and expertise. We have also been able to return the favour by passing on our advice on the Moodle VLE which the University is looking into, and given the University some ideas on how to build upon their LaTTE room to expand this more widely across the organisation.”

Useful links

South Staffordshire College
Epson interactive projectors
4d Creative

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