“Invest in developing digital skills and the fear of technology melts away”

Activate Learning is an education and training group that operates three FE colleges - Reading, Banbury and Bicester, and City of Oxford – as well as a growing number of secondary schools in the Oxfordshire and Berkshire area. It also has strong links with colleges and learning providers overseas, particularly in China, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

Cheryl worked her way through increasingly senior roles at Activate’s Reading College campus. At the start of 2016, she moved into the roles of both group executive director and head of the City of Oxford campus.

Tell us about your colleges

Our three FE colleges offer a wide range of FE courses as well as some HE provision, apprenticeships and workforce training. Together, we have about 5,500 full-time students.

We have an annual budget of around £70m and we are investing in our facilities to meet the changing expectations of staff and students as well as the evolving requirements of employers. At Oxford, for example, we have developed our new Oxford Lifestyle Centre, which has top-flight hair, beauty and fitness equipment and learning spaces plus flexible learning zones, a careers centre and café.

Why is digital important to your colleges? Can you share your vision for digital?

Digital technologies offer us new and exciting ways to meet the changing requirements of students, staff and employers.
We started working on our current vision for digital in 2012 when we were looking for ways to give students more control over what they learn, as well as how and when. We knew that digital technologies could improve teaching and learning but we’d also recognised that they would need to be firmly embedded across each institution.

Technology can’t be a bolt-on. It can be transformative but, to be truly effective, it has to pervade all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment and everyone has to be enabled to buy into it.

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

We decided right at the start that we’d need a clear plan to develop the digital skills and confidence of college staff as well as one to engage students and bring on their digital literacy skills. Students are usually very positive about technology and they often have decent capabilities with social media and so on, but they usually need help to get up to speed with the skills they’ll need for learning and ultimately for the workplace.

Our Pass It On staff development model is designed to help staff learn new skills and to cascade them through to other teachers and to students; it won Reading College an Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Award for staff development in 2015.

We have set up teacher communities to support sharing of knowledge and resources, and moved to cloud-based applications because we believe these are giving us greater opportunities to work interactively across the institutions. We use Google Apps for Education and Google Docs to support sharing and collaboration and to foster a wider sense of community. Our plan is to make it harder for people to justify working in old-fashioned silos and easier for them to participate in safe, supportive communities where they can share good practice quickly and learn from each other.

That’s what they want to do and it is what they are good at. Our learning technologists all have a teaching background so they are ideally placed to look out for the apps that have potential. Promising ones are flagged up in James Kieft’s blog, James thinks it’s worth a look. He is our group learning and development manager and he offers bite-size sessions for teachers who like the look of something he suggests, so they can evaluate it quickly and easily. Members of his team also sit in on classroom sessions so they can see what students are working on and develop ideas to make learning more effective and engaging through technology.
Every term we hold a “Green Door” week when teachers are invited to hang a green door sign on their classroom door welcoming other teachers to come and visit for 15 minutes and share their learning. It helps teachers to experiment with new learning technologies in a safe and secure environment.

Eighteen months into the staff development programme, skills and confidence continue to grow – so much so that we can see a widening gap between the digital capabilities of our current staff and the skills of new ones that come along for interview.

Students are fully behind the changes. This is clear from the feedback they are giving us and from the evidence we’re seeing in the new learning zones in our libraries. We have created these to enable students to use laptops and mobile devices for independent learning, and we’re already finding that 50-60% of student visits to the library are to take advantage of the opportunities that the learning zones offer.

So teachers and students are overwhelmingly positive about the changes that are happening in teaching and learning and there are benefits for the business, too. Because staff are sharing good practice more openly we are developing a much more agile culture. This makes it easier to shape programmes and tailor education resources, which will have a knock-on beneficial effect on our costs right across the Activate Learning Group.

**How is your strategy being implemented?**

The entire strategy is driven by our vision to improve teaching and learning and give students more control of their learning. But of course, we have had to make a very significant investment in digital infrastructure, including our WiFi to support the use of cloud-based applications, and in equipment such as Google Chromebooks and Apple MacBooks to support mobile learning.

For this reason it is important that senior management drives any change of this magnitude and that is what we are doing. I’m working with my counterpart at Reading, Paul Newman, to ensure that any stumbling blocks are removed and that investment funding is available.

On a day in, day out basis the learning technologists are implementing the digital strategy. Senior management monitors progress against our goals and projected timeframes. As I’ve already said, the work we’ve done so far has made our organisation more agile so we’re able to adapt our plans fast when things aren’t working as we’d like them to.

The importance of technology and developing our capability in digital is clearly articulated in our Activate Learning Strategic Plan 2014-2018.

Across Activate Learning, we also have a unique Learning Philosophy that recognises the impact of the brain, motivation and emotion on learning. The development of staff and students digital literacy skills in a safe and secure environment is articulated in the philosophy.
Can you share any evidence of impact in terms of cost savings, efficiency gains and improvements in student engagement?

The use of digital technologies has resulted in several operational benefits, savings and efficiencies including:

- Google Apps for Education are free and many of the other technologies we use are also free or low cost
- Students’ learning time has been extended without incurring additional staffing costs
- “Google hangouts” enable us to have meetings across the group of three colleges without anyone having to travel between the sites
- Many departments have gone paperless
- Sharing of social and collaborative digital tools among staff has reduced reliance on external training

Feedback from our external verifiers is highly positive; the awarding bodies that recognise and welcome our use of technology include Pearson, City and Guilds and Ascentis. Much of what they need to look at is now available to them online so that they can do the majority of the background work before they leave their desks. When they come out for their visit all they really need to do is take a look around and ask any questions they may still have.

What one thing has made the biggest difference to your colleges on this journey?

The introduction of faster, more reliable WiFi. It’s central to everything we want to do with cloud-based digital technologies.

Cheryl’s tips for developing a vision for digital technology in your institution:

- Explore open source applications – much of what we use is low cost or free
- Learn from other colleges and organisations; we collaborate constantly
- Maintain an ongoing programme to develop staff skills and confidence and give them safe spaces in which to experiment. It’s vital that they engage with your strategy and new technologies
- Learning technologists who come from a teaching background are ideally placed to identify technologies that will have the biggest impact on teaching and learning
More information

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Read more about Activate’s approach to technology fuelled learning and about its Learning Philosophy