Hull College Group

Thought leadership interview with Michelle Swithenbank, deputy chief executive (January 2017)

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Michelle had a background in nursing before moving into further education as a lecturer in public services and health and social care. While in post, Michelle studied for a post-graduate certificate in education so knows first-hand how a passion for the job and a willingness to learn are essential ingredients of success.

Tell us about your college

The Hull College Group is made up of four arms, Harrogate College, Goole College, Hull College and HCUK Training – a training provider working with local and national employers to deliver apprenticeships and work-based learning.

Across the Group, we have around 4796 full-time enrolments a year and many of those enrolled will progress into work or further study. We anticipate apprenticeships being an even more significant aspect of our delivery from 2017 onward, and are well prepared for that at HCUK Training. We have also made substantial investment in facilities in recent years, for example, in engineering and sports.

Employer engagement has been a strength we have been recognised for. The Hull College Group has been shortlisted for the 2017 Times Educational Supplement (TES) Employer Engagement Award, and our effective partnership working was praised by Ofsted in 2015. But we also have an excellent track record in using digital technology to enhance learning and teaching; in 2015, one of our construction lecturers was awarded the Pearson teaching award for outstanding use of technology in education.
Can you give an account of the digital journey the college has been on, and where you are today?

In December 2015, the Hull College Group Corporation approved our Innovation and Technology Strategy which defined our vision for a student-centric, high-quality, innovative and easy-to-use technology environment. I think those four descriptors capture what we are aiming for.

Further education has to take a lead from the retail sector where you have choices over what you buy and how, with as few obstacles in your way as possible. We have to move in that direction in education. We are preparing learners for the digital world at work so the curriculum, and the way it is delivered, have to be accessible, mixed and diverse.

This is why I am encouraging staff to look at different ways of doing things. It’s not about cutting out face-to-face teaching; it’s about offering greater choice. For example, I would like to see online higher education courses that can be accessed from smartphones. Adult learners need that flexibility. Part face to face, part online seems a more achievable approach to studying for a degree when you have other commitments. After all, this is what we experience in the world around us. We have a choice of queuing up to buy goods in a local store or ordering them online to be delivered, or picking them up later in store. We have to help our end users to access what we offer in a similar way – technology has a big part to play in achieving that goal.

All courses across the Group have a presence on Moodle. However, I wouldn’t say that digital is fully embedded throughout learning and teaching on campuses as yet. We still need to make improvements to the infrastructure. We have Wi-Fi-enabled classrooms here at Hull College and have Microsoft® Surface® Pro laptops available to learners and tutors to support flexible, blended learning. We could still strengthen our Wi-Fi in some areas, but we are now using Microsoft Office 365® which provides the same virtual desktop for every user in the Group giving access to online courses and content from any device.

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

We have some highly innovative teachers in the Group. The creativity and passion of our staff, and their willingness to engage with new methods, is making a real difference to learners here, and their skills have been recognised nationally.

For example, our Pearson teaching award winner, curriculum leader and tutor for carpentry and joinery, Mike Abel, developed a range of videos to make theory classes more interesting and to reinforce for his learners the correct ways of doing things in a workshop environment. Our engineering learners at Hull and Goole Colleges use
simulation software to do virtual welding before they do it 'for real' – these are stimulating ways of learning that are more responsive to learners’ needs, and we recognise and celebrate those examples of good practice.

The push for innovative technology comes from the schools themselves. They design their own curriculum and as far as possible the college supports their needs. What we can do as managers is to reward their enterprise by supplying the means and the support and training. We have undertaken a pilot, for example, in providing laptops in the classroom in the creative arts, hair and beauty, catering and special educational needs areas. With the Microsoft Office 365 suite of tools, teachers have the ability to create courses and blended learning content which learners can access on Moodle or Office 365 via their own devices before coming into class – known as flipping the classroom. If they do not own a mobile device, there are laptops for learners to borrow. Our e-learning team then provide support for staff to help them make the most of these tools.

Digital is also helping us be more effective in the delivery of apprenticeships and improving the employability of all our learners. In 2015, we introduced Smart Assessor at HCUK Training which enables managers to track the progress of every apprentice up to their expected end point. Employers have a log-in as well to measure the progress and attendance of their apprentices and the system has made caseload management for internal verification more efficient. All learners at the college have an employability passport for which they collect evidence and record it online; evidence collected is logged on ProMonitor. Depending on what they are able to demonstrate throughout their learning journey, they get a gold, silver or bronze award.

What still remains to be achieved? Where do the difficulties lie?

Of course, not all teaching staff are at ease with technology. Variation in staff e-skills and e-confidence is something many colleges are tackling but we have to look for solutions. We live in a digital world where things are faster, easier and more accessible and responsive to the end user’s needs. Learners need these capabilities as well when they leave us, so delivery of the curriculum has to keep pace. We can’t live in isolation.

To support teachers who lack e-confidence, we have an e-learning team who demonstrate new techniques in short sessions each week called the ‘Small change, big difference’ programme. But for me, you have to lead by example when it comes to helping the less confident. So I take the lead on Yammer®, which we use as a social space for staff, posting messages of congratulation about the good practice I see around the college. The e-learning team post messages on Yammer about their training sessions as well. These range from how to integrate social media into teaching to using mobiles for learning. I go to these sessions alongside staff when I can. It’s important to be a role model, to work with staff rather than tell them what they have to do.

Because we have been able to share and celebrate achievements, it has given staff the confidence to try. And already, we have got a lot braver about trying out new techniques. The success stories are making an impact. With improvements to the infrastructure, I believe we will see digital learning and teaching fully embedded before long. But it’s also a case of looking out for up and coming technology. Our aim is to be at the forefront of technology-enhanced learning.
What one thing has made the biggest difference to your college’s implementation of digital technology?

I think the one single factor is the passion of our staff. They want to try things out and move their practice forward; they are passionate about what they do. Where encouragement is needed, the best approach is to celebrate success. You can’t do something to people; you have to do something with them. That’s the best way to get people on board. We have an e-learning team and a teaching and learning team who offer support to staff through mentoring, but this is something I would like to develop further.

What advice would you have for other senior leaders on developing their visions for digital?

I would say, lead the way, empower staff and celebrate successes. For example, I post on Yammer, I use Microsoft OneNote® to manage my day-to-day tasks, and all of the one-to-ones I conduct are recorded on OneNote Classroom. Then heads of department have to log on to get the records. You have to lead the way, empower staff then celebrate best practice. That way, they want to do it for themselves.

More information

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