"I am now seeing some truly brilliant things happening. There is a real spirit of innovation here now"

Simon has a passion for the use of information technology to enhance teaching, learning and employability. With 20 years’ experience of working in post-16 education, including senior leadership posts in three Hampshire colleges, Simon has responsibility at Portsmouth College for the curriculum, quality improvement, staff development and student services, and is a trained Ofsted Inspector.

Tell us about your college

Portsmouth College is a sixth form college of around 1400 full-time students following BTEC, CTEC, NVQ and GCSE as well as AS and A-level courses. In addition, we offer apprenticeships in a growing number of vocational areas and run a sizeable number of adult education classes. We also offer an extensive enterprise and employability programme, which we call our ‘E5’ offer.

Our aim is to be an inclusive organisation serving the needs of all post-16 learners in our catchment area. Traditionally, this has been the city of Portsmouth which has some of the country’s most deprived wards, but in recent years we been attracting students from further afield, including the Isle of Wight, Chichester and Fareham. In fact, we have seen a 27% increase in student numbers since 2014 when the college launched its personalised learning strategy.

Can you give an account of the digital journey the college has been on, and where you are today?

In September 2014, we took the bold step of providing all full-time 16-18 year-olds with iPad Minis™. Apple® technology with its associated App Store and iBooks® has been at the heart of teaching and learning here ever since. Combined with redesigned learning spaces and high density Wi-Fi across the campus, this stratagem has given everyone at Portsmouth College the same opportunities for anytime, anywhere learning.
The iPad Minis are not intended simply for searching the internet. With an airplay receiver called AirServer® installed on our classroom computers, our students are able to mirror their iPad Mini screens onto the whiteboard so that they can project their work to other students, in effect taking up the role of presenter/teacher. This opens up a range of new, engaging, interactive opportunities for learning in the classroom. It has also become possible to provide one-to-one support, assessment and feedback in the classroom when needed. Digital has made this kind of sophisticated yet personalised learning experience a reality for us.

Why did the college opt for this approach?

Rather than keeping technology on the periphery of teaching and learning, we decided to go digital to the core. Technology as the norm in teaching and learning stimulates new approaches, provides greater pace and variety during lessons and at the same time boosts teachers’ technical know-how and improves students’ independent learning and employability skills.

Our 2013 Ofsted inspection graded us as good in all areas, which was an improvement on the satisfactory grade of the previous inspection. So we knew we were on the right lines but still needed to make that step change to become an outstanding provider.

The first stage of our strategy for improvement was to overhaul the college timetable. Instead of the traditional run of one-hour lessons with short gaps in between for independent study, we introduced three-hour single-subject blocks in the morning and two-hour ones in the afternoon. This gives students a chance to focus better when they are in class, but also to pursue their choice of enrichment activities in greater depth.

The new timetable was immediately popular with students, but in other ways was risky – teachers would need to create changes in pace and type of activity to hold students’ attention over the longer lesson span. Relying solely on traditional approaches to classroom management wouldn’t be the answer anymore. We were increasingly aware that we were working with a digitally proficient generation and needed to catch up.

For this to work in practice, every student and teacher would need to use the same device. After researching all available options, we chose iPad Minis as the personal tool of choice for teachers and students. Possessing a certain cachet, reliable, lightweight and intuitive to use, these devices would not present so many difficulties if given to all students and staff. Apple’s App Store with its extensive range of high-tech resources was another deciding factor.

We now offer three options to students when they first join the college:

a) Each full-time 16-18 year old can receive an iPad Mini 2 and protective case free of charge. They pay a non-refundable insurance premium of around £40 per year; the device remains the property of the college but can be bought at the end of their course, if desired;
b) Instead of receiving the standard issue iPad Mini, students can purchase a higher-specification iPad through a lease-purchase scheme set up with a local company;

c) Students can use their own iPads/iPad Minis if they already have these but must download Apps at their own expense to meet the requirements of individual courses, and pay for their own insurance. We don’t currently support other tablets or mobiles because courses are now built around Apple resources.

Whether their role is teaching, learning resources or learning support, all student-facing staff have iPad Minis as well to ensure everyone has access to the same devices and resources. Of course, this has meant investment in staff training but doing so has yielded dividends in quality improvement. Consultants working for the Apple Distinguished Educator programme have not only shown us which buttons to press, they have given us new ideas, introduced us to some amazing new resources and shown how these can open up a more learner-centred approach to pedagogy. We are all on the same learning journey which makes it a really powerful – and empowering – experience, but we are still having periodic training sessions to take us forward. Establishing effective digital teaching and learning is not a short-term process.

Apple did not offer us any concessions; we bought the first year’s set of iPad Minis from our own reserves with the support of our governing body. We knew we were still learning how to make the best use of these devices, so it felt wrong to ask students to purchase their own. Now our outgoings are less – the majority of the loaned iPad Minis are returned when students leave college and we do not need to invest so much in desktop PCs. Increased enrolments from the success of the scheme are also helping to cover our costs.

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

The biggest impact has been on the quality of lesson planning and delivery. When I take visitors round the college on learning walks, I now see some truly brilliant things happening. There is a real spirit of innovation here now. People feel supported in making changes so are more willing to experiment.

I have always said this would be a five-year project but already we are seeing tangible benefits. The digital capabilities of students have improved and so have their independent learning skills. You can see this in the improved grades, especially for male students. The attainment gap between males and females has narrowed at the college since the strategy was launched, which suggests our digital approach is more engaging for the boys! And students as a whole like the new timetable – it helps them plan their time better.

A lot of momentum has actually come from the staff themselves. At the start, we relied on student ambassadors in the classroom to help their peers and teachers use the iPads. At the same time, a team of more technology-confident teachers became our ‘Apple pioneers’, providing encouragement and technical know-how to get their colleagues started on planning lessons around the technology. Next came ‘Apple champions’, staff with a growing interest in using the devices to enhance learning and teaching who were paid extra to work with individual departments or groups of staff. Now our staff mentors are known as ‘learning champions’.
Rather than dominating our thinking, the technology is just a means of achieving the kind of ‘curious and creative learning’ that will make our college outstanding. That is how far we have travelled since 2014.

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

You move through stages to become proficient in digital learning and teaching. The first stage is replication – which usually means transposing paper handouts on to the screen. Next comes augmentation when you realise the potential the technology gives them to extend and deepen student learning. With greater confidence comes real transformation – use of the technology to create a learning experience that could not happen any other way.

I think some of our staff are still at the first stage. But a large number are now creating transformative learning experiences for their students. Our learning champions are at the heart of this progress. They share good practice and set up learning communities for staff. Others are looking at content creation for our A-level courses and a new platform such as Google Classroom to pull all this good work together. We couldn’t have done this without them.

What one thing has made the biggest difference to your college’s implementation of digital technology?

The spirit of innovation and experimentation amongst our staff, students, leadership and governors has been without a doubt our most valuable asset on this journey.

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

- Don’t start with the technology. Make teaching and learning the focus of your vision then find the technology to help you achieve it
- Plan over a three to five year period with clear targets for each stage of the journey
• Make it a journey everyone is on together, from the principal down; establish a culture of adventure and nurture its growth by appointing ambassadors and champions from the body of students and staff. They will be your most persuasive agents of change

• Celebrate successes and reward key players but also share your frustrations when something doesn’t quite go to plan. Use social media and other forms of marketing to make sure the outside world knows about your innovation and shares the journey with you

• Finally, when introducing change, don’t do things by halves. Go for it lock, stock and barrel. Soft launches and small-group pilots convince no one

More information

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