Background

Hillcroft College is the national residential college for women returning to education (aged 19+). Thanks to Hillcroft’s unique support, women who might not otherwise have access to learning can improve their job opportunities, confidence and life choices. The residential experience includes tuition, accommodation, childcare, food and travel, and most of the courses are free to students on means-tested benefits. Subjects include English, maths, computer skills and digital arts, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), health and life skills and finance, while longer courses provide access and pre-access to higher education.

Hillcroft is the second smallest college in the UK with around 350–400 learners (70 full-time equivalent students). It promotes best practice in the advancement of equality and diversity, and is committed to providing a positive and supportive learning and working environment for all. Many of its students have multiple learning needs, and the college specialises in support for learners with dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Strategic priorities

The Hillcroft ethos is that learners must become digital citizens first, and that this is a foundation for becoming digital learners and workers.

At a lower level it’s just things like online shopping, booking a trip, using email. It’s doing any of the interactions you need to do with the government, whether it’s council tax, benefits, or using a bank account.

Beyond access to digital services, there is a focus on employability and on students becoming lifelong learners who can use their online access to continue building their skills. E-Safety is another priority issue. Training has now been included in the induction for the virtual learning environment (VLE) on level 2 and 3 courses (these cover information literacy, learning skills, ICT literacies and communication and collaboration from the Jisc seven elements of digital literacy, but the college has been looking at the work of the Tinder Foundation and Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and believes that they could be doing more.

With the support of Jisc, the college has decided that it needs to take a more strategic approach to digital capability, with a survey of staff and the drafting of a digital strategy.

Leadership of change

Responsibility for the digital capabilities of staff and students rests between the library and the learning resources team, which also manages the VLE.

It’s really fascinating because a lot of e-learning people are getting into digital skills while in the library we’ve been involved in that since the beginning. But there is a certain amount of staking out space.

A tech user group has to date been asked mainly for feedback on technical and customer service issues, but will now play a role in devising the digital strategy.
Actions for digital capability

Hillcroft’s current digital capability journey began with a survey of staff confidence and skills.

An Excel version of the Jisc question set was transferred into SurveyMonkey and staff were asked to respond. Results showed that most staff were not using social media for learning. They wanted more training on using smartboards and other classroom technologies. But some lacked more basic skills such as the use of productivity tools, searching and bookmarking, or copying and pasting text.

When the college first introduced iPads and Kindles, staff needed support to begin using them effectively for themselves, before they were ready to consider how best they could be used with learners. Since then they have adopted a range of apps for classroom use. The library and learning resources centre (LRC) team have delivered all the relevant staff development sessions.

Two years ago the college changed its VLE design and hosting, and contracted an external trainer to train staff on the new system. This allowed internal staff to concentrate on developing materials for more general digital issues and concerns.

The college has a very strong base of learner support (hillcroft.ac.uk/the-college/learner-support), including support for learners with visual or hearing impairment, mental health issues, mobility issues and who are differently abled in other ways. Central support for learners’ digital capability has been three-fold.

» Helping learners to use assistive software and equipment, for example as provided by the dyslexia and dyspraxia support service

» Helping learners with basic access signing on to systems, using a mouse and keyboard, accessing the internet and web services

» Helping learners with library and information skills such as referencing, information management and avoiding plagiarism

When the college introduced Kindles and iPads, students also needed induction in how to cut, copy and paste, print, bookmark, add notes, and navigate. Now, however, students are beginning to see a wider range of digital tools being used in the classroom and to ask for more.

Moving ahead

Some members of staff – via the tech user group – have been given access to Microsoft Virtual Academy (https://mva.microsoft.com) and begun helping themselves to training in the applications that interest them most. With this greater confidence has come more experimentation with apps in the classroom. The LRC team have been promoting apps through Kindle and iPad support before the advent of Microsoft Academy. There is interest in using OneNote, which will now be piloted with a wider group.
The college has an active blog, Facebook page and Twitter account. There are plans to introduce these to students and encourage them to play a part in creating the content and shaping the reputation of the college in the wider world.

**Opportunities for the future**

There are huge opportunities for digital capabilities to make a difference at Hillcroft. Some students can participate more fully in learning because content is digitised and made accessible, or because they have access to networked digital devices for the first time. Some are learning to participate in a digital society. And some are gaining the skills they need to access higher education or rewarding work.

*Technology will always be changing, and you will always need to build on the skills you already have. It’s never ending.*

There are also challenges, especially around resourcing. Many students are socially excluded and do not own any digital devices, so these have to be provided for them.

*That’s costly, and students don’t have the same relationship with them. For example we can’t lend people Kindles to use in their own time and place, because that is a restriction placed on them by the provider.*

Subscription models for digital services have usually been designed for much larger organisations, and it can be difficult for providers to arrive at an affordable price. But as the Learning resources manager says, there are free and open alternatives to many of the services in common use, and they can be even more valuable because learners can take their resources with them when they move on.

**Lessons learned**

» Digital access can be especially valuable to students with additional learning needs – but can also present an additional barrier. Expect to invest in devices, and in digitising resources, as well as in intensive support (one to one if necessary) for learners to develop their digital skills

» If subscription services are unreasonably priced for a small organisation, consider what features can still be made available in the free version or in a free/open alternative

» By focusing on digital citizenship and participation, students can also be developing skills that will help them become effective lifelong learners and that will be attractive to employers

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Any unattributed quotes in the text were provided and have been approved by the contacts above.

**For more information**

on all related resources please see the Building digital capability project page:  
http://ji.sc/building-digicap