“We owe it to our learners to be at the cutting edge, not the back end of technology.”

A self-confessed gaming obsessive, Debra came into management via teaching, and still has a strong connection with the profession. She has led more than one college team to a Beacon award, and has overseen the improvements that resulted in Grimsby Institute becoming an Ofsted outstanding college. For Debra, embracing the modern digital world is a key part of a college’s journey towards excellence.

Tell us about your college

Grimsby Institute for Further and Higher Education is part of the Grimsby Institute Group, one of England's largest providers of further and higher education. Apart from the Institute itself, the Group comprises University Centre Grimsby, Scarborough TEC, Skegness TEC, Workforce Skills, the college’s apprenticeship arm, and Modal Training, a multi-modal logistics centre on the banks of the Humber.

We also have six learning centres outside our main towns and have set up an academy here in Grimsby to offer an alternative educational route for 14-16 year olds which includes Career 6, our sixth form provision for learners committed to particular career pathways.

Ranging from entry level qualifications to apprenticeships and degrees, the Group provides education and training opportunities across a 140-mile span of the east coast - and beyond since we are now creating apps to deliver learning nationwide.

So I don’t think you could call Grimsby Institute a standard FE college at all. Focused on keeping agile, we aim to be able to respond to further gaps in the market wherever and whenever these might occur. For many years now, change has been the only constant in further education, so keeping agile is paramount.
How important is digital to the achievement of the Group’s strategic aims?

Very important, but not quite as was originally envisaged by FELTAG. The FELTAG report was written in the expectation of one college, one policy for digital learning, but things are very different now. This is the era of college group structures – complex, multi-faceted organisations offering greater breadth of provision alongside economies of scale.

One college delivering traditional provision – those days, I think, are over. A more nuanced approach is needed now, with digital strategies fitting individual delivery elements of a Group. These could be operating locally, regionally or nationally in a variety of contexts with a variety of stakeholders.

When I took up my current post, I recognised that greater investment in technology was the only way forward in the complex, multi-site environment of the Grimsby Institute Group. This is for a number of reasons.

Firstly, we owe it to our learners to be at the cutting edge, not the back end of technology. It’s not just a case of improving their employability, although that is important in its own right. Today, you need a grasp of technology to have any kind of cultural currency whether that be at work, when seeking work or just socialising. The modern digital world is our students’ world; it’s beholden on us to join in to enable them to acquire the digital capabilities they need to function in the world outside.

However, when times get tough as they are today, we have had to find innovative ways of funding the technology learners need. This is why at Grimsby, we have been working closely with partners in industry and higher education to write project bids that help us secure new sources of income.

Then we have a duty to keep pace with industry – that’s our day job, if you like, and if we fail in that, we are not doing what we are here for. So we have managed to invest in new forms of edtech such as simulation and mixed reality software that bring the world of work right into the classroom. By these means, learners experience virtually what it’s like to steer a ship from a bridge or work in a food processing plant without exposure to danger, and without incurring expense or wasting resources such as time and manpower. When they leave us, these learners can go straight into the workplace with the skills and knowledge their employers need.

Colleges need to take advantage of the business efficiency gains technology offers; an improved virtual learning environment (VLE) or more robust wifi and telephony services can help you integrate sites more effectively or open up new markets through distance learning. In addition, investing in cutting edge technology attracts learners and increases their chances of achieving a successful outcome. Metrics such as these add to the profile of the college.

Finally, growing up with computer games taught me that technology gives you the ability to change the character of something – that’s vital when you need to be at the forefront of change as we do in further education. And, although it hasn’t been easy, change is not always a bad thing. I would argue the straitened economic climate we currently work under has fuelled rather than diminished our ability to innovate.
Can you give an account of the digital journey the college has been on, and where you are today?

It is important to recognise that with technology you are always on a journey, and each individual is on their own particular journey. Learning, like change, is constant.

However, we have come a long way since we set up a department for innovation, known as Innovate. This is our team of learning technologists who work in conjunction with our quality team to support the embedding of the Group’s digital strategy. Now, in 2018, we have appointed a director of digital learning technologies to drive that agenda forward. These two teams work across the whole Group, training, supporting and developing staff skills to meet our strategic aims.

Our innovation and quality hub, set up in 2016, is the focal point for staff who want to learn new skills – and gain the confidence they need to progress. It has three specially equipped spaces – the learning lab, the learning lecture space and the learning lounge, each equipped with a range of connected technologies and devices including iPads, laptops, Surface Pros, desktop PCs, large screen TVs, Hololens and virtual reality equipment and a Surface Hub or Smart Screen.

Bookable on a daily basis, these high-tech spaces enable our staff to innovate with blended or flipped learning techniques and try out new technologies before deploying them ‘for real’ in a classroom or workshop.

Then came our ‘Level Up’ initiative which won a Beacon award in 2017. In this scheme, staff undertake short chunks of training to acquire silver or gold awards in different digital skills. The idea is to break down skills development into 15-minute, bite-sized chunks to help even the busiest member of staff ‘level up’ their digital skills. And when I say staff, I really mean everyone. For example, I have achieved a silver award in Office 365 and a gold award for the use of our VLE, Canvas.

Once achieved, you post a photo of your award on Yammer and nominate two other people to take part, cascading the idea, and the desire to gain digital skills, in an effective and positive way.

Without this kind of investment, we can’t hope to keep up with what our industry partners are doing on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, with the rapid pace at which technology changes, a five- or even a three-year digital strategy can only struggle to keep up. So we treat our digital strategy as a living document that is reviewed and refreshed every 18 months or so. With technology, you can’t plan too far ahead or you will lose the agility you need to respond to new developments.

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

I think colleges have to be at the leading edge of technology. For us, this has meant prioritising virtual and augmented reality technologies as all the evidence suggests these really work for today’s learners. We were one
of the first UK colleges to buy into Microsoft Hololens and I have a virtual rig myself at home. The games-based learning this technology can support for me is key to the future of education and training.

Having said that, I am not advocating use of technology for its own sake. Technology has to be used in a pedagogically sound way. Otherwise, why use it? But leaders could achieve much more if they understood what kind of technology an average learner has at his/her disposal and how the interests and skills they are acquiring through its use could be leveraged for learning gain.

Ask what your average learner is using in terms of technology then work out how you could leverage that knowledge and ability to enhance their educational experience.

Then ensure your staff are supported in a positive way to acquire the skills they need to keep up. We have not mandated participation in the Level Up initiative. Cascading through nominating other staff we have found works better as staff can become quite competitive with one another. I also believe in leading by example so made sure my own digital learning journey was shared with the college.

In general, it is important to listen and observe what the young are doing. I play Minecraft, Warcraft and Fortnite regularly with my 13 year-old son, and as a first-generation games player myself, I know we still haven’t capitalised enough on the technology around us.

Find out more

Email: grayd@grimsby.ac.uk
Twitter: @Deb_Gray_1