Digital storytelling for the future

Harlow College (April 2019)

Summary

Harlow College, a general further education college in Essex, has transformed learning and teaching on full-time courses by providing learners and staff with iPads pre-installed with a selection of carefully chosen apps. The initiative has not only revitalised classroom teaching but has also given learners the opportunity to create digital narratives about who they are and what they have achieved.

Initially focusing on a core of five apps, the college’s iPad implementation journey is told in our 2016 case study: Engagement is the key to success. Since a further five have been added to form a “top ten” suite of apps, learners have had even more opportunities to present themselves and their achievements to a range of audiences, including future employers.

Harlow aims to be at the forefront of blended learning and teaching and, in 2017, was awarded “Apple Distinguished School” status for its transformative learning, teaching and assessment with Apple® products.

Challenge

Further education colleges have for some time used e-portfolio tools for tracking and evidencing achievement in apprenticeships and other vocational courses that stipulate an e-portfolio component for assessment, verification and/or auditing purposes. But records of competencies, however efficient and necessary, are not designed to capture a rounded picture of the learner or inspire reflection on and ownership of learning over a longer period of time.

With 21st century digital tools widely available on smartphones and tablets, the college poses the question: how can we take advantage of what is freely available to inspire learners to narrate their own learning journeys and demonstrate their achievements and employability?

Solution

Dave Monk, Harlow College’s e-learning development coordinator, believes that traditional e-portfolio systems have less and less relevance in further education today, if you take the evidencing and auditing tools required on some vocational courses out of the equation.

With a built-in camera and downloadable apps such as Photos and iMovie for editing and curating material, the tablets in themselves become a powerful tool for on-the-spot capture for digital storytelling. All learners need for the next step, a formal presentation, is a secure online personal space in which to store the best content they have created and tools to give it a professional finish.

“With the loan of an iPad installed with some creative apps, our learners have a far greater range of opportunities than anything previously available to us to capture what they have been doing and fashion it into a presentation about themselves that is usable now and in the future.”

Dave Monk, e-learning development coordinator, Harlow College
Among the other key apps in Harlow’s top ten are Showbie, Padlet and Adobe® Spark. Learners also have Microsoft® OneDrive accounts. Once they know how to use these tools, learners have a range of effective options at their fingertips for capturing their learning journeys. And as new apps become available, offering iPads on a loan and return basis means that the suite of tools available to learners and teachers can be easily updated.

Benefits

As well as improving engagement with classroom learning, evidence is growing that Harlow College’s iPad initiative is empowering learners to reflect on their performance and plan for the future. The following examples show this in action:

The college’s supported studies learners have been recreating their learning journeys using an online book creator app to capture voice, written text, images and video footage. Using the software personalises the activity in more ways than one as learners are creating a portfolio of their experiences in a way that suits their individual needs. Free to choose a medium that suits them, they work as effectively as possible, yet are challenged to try new ideas. That these learners thrive on being able to capture their thoughts in different ways is shown by their increased confidence; some have overcome disability and others improved their communication skills by sharing their learning journeys with their family or potential employers.

Students of dance and theatre use a number of Harlow’s top ten apps to film their own performance, invite feedback from friends and tutors, reflect on it and produce a showcase of their best work ahead of an audition. Media students use Padlet in a similar way to complete reflective journeys, in the process thinking about their progress and identifying areas in which to improve. Encouraged to gather peer feedback to enhance the process, these learners start to develop the higher order thinking skills that open the door to improved grades.

In another example, carpentry learners use a QR code to access their Padlet walls to share with their parents. On the wall are images, time-lapse videos and comments about their work, including formative and summative feedback from tutors. This simple capture of workshop activities and feedback encapsulates a range of e-portfolio functions, including recording skills development, identifying what needs to improve, receiving and giving feedback, sharing and presenting progress and achievements.

So as the top ten apps become embedded into learning and teaching across the college, use of the tools is expanding into personal development planning and employability, at the same time, bringing a 21st century approach to e-portfolio building into being:

“\textit{I look on traditional e-portfolio tools now as something from the past. What we offer instead is a rich toolkit that learners can personalise to their own tastes and purposes. In the process, we have rewritten the rule book for some apps. Padlet, for example, used to be seen as a pin board for ideas and messages. Now learners use it to upload e-portfolio content. Who would have thought that a few years ago?}”

\textbf{Dave Monk, e-learning development coordinator, Harlow College}

Making it happen

It is important to note that these benefits have not come about in a vacuum.

Since the initiative began, Harlow College has run a scaffolded programme of staff and curriculum development using the strategy of a selected top ten apps to increase confidence and encourage take-up – as well as Microsoft OneDrive, PowerPoint, Apple iMovie and Notes, Adobe Spark, Showbie and Padlet, the top ten suite also includes Remind, Nearpod and Kahoot! With the exception of Notes, any of these apps can be used on other devices which makes digital learning activities accessible to anyone without an iPad and in a greater range of contexts.
Other implementation strategies include a digital support app which offers short, how-to videos for support in the classroom, with the option of PDFs for printable guidance. Digital leaders in each curriculum team give on-the-spot advice to colleagues on embedding digital into learning and teaching while a team of student ambassadors add further ideas and insights from their perspective.

As a prompt to think about their future, many of the activities arising from the iPad scheme target learners’ employability, and regular contact with industry keeps employability skills high on the agenda on most college courses.

As a consequence of this careful approach to implementation, it has become natural for learners to use these digital tools independently to document and present their personal learning journeys. But it is probably the expectations and enthusiasm of those who have successfully used the apps that has the most impact on their peers:

“I never underestimate the power of students to drive forward adoption of new technologies among their peers.”

Dave Monk, e-learning development coordinator, Harlow College

Learning from experience

It is difficult to predict future trends in digital technology but Dave Monk believes the secret of keeping ahead of the curve is to keep an eye on developments occurring naturally, then to make sure you are in a position to extract the maximum potential from new tools that lend themselves to educational purposes.

“As learners come to us more digitally savvy, their use of ‘what’s out there’ in their learning will grow, and institutionally owned technologies will become less relevant. We are helping them to create the future. We just need to give them the tools so they can take charge of how they learn.”

Dave Monk, e-learning development coordinator, Harlow College

Kelly Edwards, the college’s director of professional development, sees an institutionally owned product for e-portfolios being unlikely to achieve the degree of personal ownership of learning the iPad initiative has instilled; a key factor encouraging take-up of the top ten is the excitement and pleasure young people find in using apps on their smartphones and tablets.

More importantly from the perspective of employability, the approach has developed learners’ understanding of how to apply everyday technology to improve their life chances:

“Students arrive at college with the ability to navigate social media and the internet for their personal use; using technology to improve their experience of teaching and learning and preparing themselves for their future is slightly different. The simple strategy that we have used has allowed students to see how effective technology can be to support their learning, make their learning seamless and prepare them for their next steps.”

Kelly Edwards, director of professional development, Harlow College

Find out more

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Watch the video: Developing digital capability in partnership with staff and learners  (Jisc 2018)