

Digital student exemplars

Enhancing the digital experience of students

This case study is relevant to the digital student challenge:

Take a strategic approach to developing the student digital experience

Technology: a fundamental aspect of teaching, learning and assessment

Reading College (part of **activate learning**) is taking a holistic approach to developing their digital strategy by integrating use of learning technologies within learning, teaching and assessment practices. The strategy focuses on good practice in teaching and learning and aims to enhance the students' learning experience both within the classroom and to extend learning beyond the classroom walls.

A key principle is that students will have access to learning at any time, any place and from any device. A big step-change in working towards this was the decision to move away from Moodle as the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) in 2014 and to encourage all staff to use web-based apps and social media tools to engage students and to develop a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

Turning off the VLE and switching to use **Google Apps** is making a positive impact on many aspects of the students' digital experience:

Deliver a relevant digital curriculum

The college uses web-based apps and social media tools within the Google apps suite to engage students and to develop employability skills by emulating modern working practices. Examples include:

- » Instant chat, instant messaging and Google+ to encourage learners to continue to discuss subject and course-related learning outside of formal taught sessions
- » Google+ communities to develop professional social media skills with peers and tutors, and to encourage collaboration and the sharing of resources
- » Encouraging students to use a range of other web-based apps so that they are always future gazing, exploring other tools that are available and expanding their knowledge and transferable skills
- » GoogleGlass is being used in practical sessions for subjects such as plumbing and catering to stream live demonstrations and to record work for reflection and as portfolio evidence

"So often we stick to tried and tested VLEs without actually exploring other opportunities like cloud-based technology and looking at different ways of working and then being prepared to experiment, have a go and bring fresh innovation into the college for the good of the students."

Cheryl Pennington, assistant principal for teaching, learning and quality at Reading College, part of Activate Learning

Deliver a robust, flexible digital environment

Moving to Google Apps has given students and staff the flexibility to develop their own VLE – something that has been a big hit with both user groups and that has helped to develop a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning

- » Students have Google accounts providing access to a range of Google tools and unlimited cloud storage. They are able to access these tools wherever they have internet access and are continuing to learn outside of formal class times, demonstrating their ability to learn independently and to work with others – essential employability skills
- » Independent learning spaces equipped with Chromebooks are available on the college campus and a further supply of Chromebooks and iPad minis are available for use in classrooms by learners who either choose not to bring their own devices or who do not have access to them
- » To support use of browser-based technologies and BYO the college has invested in the wireless network to ensure there is sufficient capacity to support this way of working
- » Because technology is regarded as a fundamental aspect of teaching, learning and assessment, learning technology staff work alongside teaching and learning staff to ensure technology is integrated within the curriculum

"The role of senior managers is very important in setting the way forward for the digital agenda. You need to have buy-in from senior managers to support both the investment in infrastructure and moving more to mobile devices as well as to support staff and empower them to develop their skills and confidence when using new technologies. It is also important for senior managers to be involved and use learning technologies so that they are also role modelling the technologies that staff in the organisation will use."

Cheryl Pennington, assistant principal for teaching, learning and quality at Reading College, part of activate learning

Engage in dialogue with students about their digital experience and empower them to develop their digital environment

Students are engaged in discussions around technology in a variety of ways:

- » A frequent 'my views' online Google-based survey invites students to contribute their views on a termly basis about their learning experience, including the role of technology as a central component of their overall experience
- » During 'learning walks' students are asked about their experiences, how technology is shaping and enhancing learning and what more they would like to see
- » There is also a small student group called the 'go team' comprising level 2 IT students who contribute to the digital agenda of the college and the skills development of both students and staff. The relationship is mutually beneficial – tutors benefit from the students skills and the students get to develop their communication and presentation skills

Support students and staff to work successfully with digital technologies

- » To prepare teachers for the change of approach a college-wide programme of continuous professional development (CPD) was developed that models the way learners use Google Apps. This is helping teaching staff to design learning activities that are more collaborative and that better suit the learners' needs
- » A range of CPD options are offered including bite-sized sessions, online CPD, open classrooms, the modelling of the use of technology and technology mentoring
- » There is a culture of sharing throughout activate learning that is facilitated by social media. Initiatives include **Pass it on bloggers** where staff share their reflections and practice and **James thinks it's worth a look**, learning technologies manager, James Kieft's blog that highlights a wide range of apps and suggests how they can be used to support teaching and learning
- » Google+ communities provide students with a safe place to share their thoughts and views with peers and tutors
- » Using GoogleApps and other web-based technologies provides students with the ability to network and collaborate electronically as well as to showcase their talents through a well-developed social media network
- » Students gain experience and confidence by working on live projects with industry, most recently the engineering students worked on a live **eco car project** supported by staff from BP

"Google+ communities allow students to practice in a private space, sort of walled garden, where they can share their thoughts and views with peers and tutors in a safe space. They can get used to using social media in a professional manner without being in the public eye."

James Kieft, learning technologies manager, Reading College, part of Activate Learning

How does this meet the challenges?

- » The strategic decision to turn off the institutional VLE and move to the use of apps and web-based technologies has encouraged staff to think about the way students use technologies and to develop new approaches that stimulate collaborative learning
- » Learners are developing employability skills and naturally emulating behaviours common to modern working practise
- » A proactive approach to staff CPD accompanied by support for students has seen a significant step forward in the development of digital literacy skills and a resilient approach to change
- » The environment has been adapted to facilitate greater use of BYO and mobile devices and to support both collaborative and independent learning outside of the classroom

- » Senior management support has been instrumental in leading and driving the change

Find out more:

- » Watch the [YouTube video](#) of assistant principal Cheryl Pennington talking about how important it is that senior managers set and support the digital agenda for colleges and how some of the barriers to integrating technology are being addressed at Reading College
- » Listen to the [podcast](#) of learning technologies manager James Kieft, talking about using web-based apps and social media to engage students and equip them with employability skills (transcript available [here](#))

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