

# Thanet College

## A journey of discovery

### The College

Based in Broadstairs, Kent, Thanet College provides a comprehensive range of full-time, part-time, distance learning and community-based courses to approximately 8,000 students. The College has a highly successful track record of working with a diverse range of local employer organisations and is a leading provider of work-based learning.

### Planning the journey: the context

The success of a series of technology-enhanced learning initiatives implemented by Thanet College inspired Geoff Rebbeck, Learning Coordinator, to embark on a new journey to discover the personal and professional benefits of e-portfolios. Within this case study, Geoff provides an insight into the development, challenges and outcomes of the College's latest technology-enhanced learning initiative.

Geoff's extensive involvement with the JISC e-Learning programme and its outreach activities has enabled him to appreciate the positive impact of e-learning:

- Within personal and professional development
- Within the teaching and learning experience for both staff and students
- Through its role in support of an institution's profile and reputation within the education sector

While he acknowledges the potential challenges associated with e-learning development, Geoff believes that the benefits gained far outweigh the difficulties of solving any emerging problems.

'We have to make progress in e-learning and understand the benefits and challenges. (e-learning) provides a key focus for personal and professional development and the future of teaching and learning', commented Geoff.

Two College initiatives informed the development and implementation of Thanet College's e-learning plans:

1. A survey of College staff: this provided information about the confidence levels of staff who used technology-enhanced learning and development
2. The development of generic skills/competencies for College job roles/disciplines: this process informed the development of a framework to support the learning themes within the initiative

‘Understanding how we change our behaviour in working through technology is critical. We are working with brand new concepts in pedagogy and planning is vital. We cannot rely just on technology itself to provide all of the answers’.

## **Making the most of resources from the JISC e-Learning programme**

Geoff highlighted the invaluable resources available through the JISC e-Learning programme, which have been developed specifically to provide support and guidance for e-learning initiatives. For example, the programme’s Effective Practice Guides, including Effective Practice in a Digital Age (JISC, 2009) and Effective Practice with e-Portfolios (JISC, 2008). On a personal note, Geoff also acknowledged the value of the following articles, referenced or included within the guides:

- *Investigating e-portfolios: The practitioner’s perspective*, by Julie Hughes, e-Portfolio Practitioner at the University of Wolverhampton
- The range of articles and journals produced by Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, of the University of Nottingham and Honorary Fellow, Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia, including *Impact study of e-portfolios on learning*

‘The effective practice guides are well written and concise. They provide good examples of how other people see the problem, but also show that it is possible to develop a solution. They give you a real confidence boost’.

Geoff has attended many JISC events, as both delegate and contributor, and acknowledged how supportive this involvement had been to his own development. He believed the recent Effective Practice with e-Portfolios workshops, run jointly by the JISC e-Learning programme and JISC Netskills, were particularly beneficial. The presentations provided valuable insights and, through networking opportunities, Geoff could share experiences of how projects within other institutions had contributed to the development of the learning experience.

## **The journey**

‘We want staff to create a journey in narrative that will be as individual as the people involved’.

The Thanet College e-portfolios initiative combined three distinct activity strands:

1. Improving confidence in the use of e-learning
2. Helping staff to demonstrate progress towards meeting personal job role standards
3. Offering a qualification as a contribution towards these standards in the form of an ITQ (The National Vocational Qualification for IT users, managed by e-skills UK, the Sector Skills Council for Business and Information Technology)

All three elements are delivered, wholly or in part, through a reflective portfolio.

Key objectives outlined for the Thanet College initiative included:

- Allow participants to capture and account for a personal development journey
- Develop skills which can be benchmarked against the College's agreed professional skills/competencies set, in order to support the learning enterprise of the institution
- Enhance the learning experience of students through the use of innovative learning methods and initiatives
- Provide evidence of personal and professional development to support, for example, the College's staff appraisal process
- Provide participants with the opportunity to gain a formal ITQ qualification

The final phase of the initiative (the ITQ) began in April 2010: nine members of the College's teaching staff decided to undertake an ITQ, which will complete in November, 2010.

The development of the ITQ's six Units in the form of web folios (e-portfolio presentations) served to contribute to the College's agreed skills/competencies set and also provided the framework for the last element of the initiative. The learning journey required participants to complete a series of 'mini' portfolios to create the six individual narratives of their personal and professional development experiences, using a combination of mapping and reflective practices. These were then aggregated within one full ITQ folio. This approach enabled participants to own and manage the content of their individual portfolios, while enjoying the freedom to decide how, when and with whom they would share information and experiences.

The content and style of the journey narratives, together with hyper links to specific outcomes and materials, evidenced personal and professional development. Participants also agreed to share their journey narratives to support the effectiveness of the College's assessment process.

'The approach ensured that participants are able to capture and account professionally for their own unique professional development'. This allows technology to get to the heart of professional development'.

### **An engaging approach**

Geoff fully appreciated that an engaging mode of delivery, as well as internal organisational buy-in, would be critical to the support of both the development and the outcomes of the initiative.

The initiative delivery process included:

- A monthly 90 minute class delivered in the College's learning lab by TechDis, which played a vital role in the learning and development process

- Individual interaction, plus interaction on a broader scale, provided support for participants at every stage of the journey.
- The opportunity for participants to share information on their own terms

The strategy to achieve internal College buy-in to the initiative included:

- The development of the initiative as a tangible product, able to provide practical benefits to the individual and institution
- Securing the trust and confidence of the College's senior management team, who supported the initiative as "professional endeavour"
- The implementation of pragmatic changes to a number of the College's processes: for example, the integration of recognised practices, such as observation and appraisal, within the e-portfolios
- Linking a contribution to the e-portfolios programme with a recognised qualification

Videos, available via the College's web site and YouTube, have supported awareness raising for the initiative, and have included an endorsement from the College Principal, for example.

## **The challenges**

The development and implementation of the initiative created its own unique set of challenges. These included:

- Integrating and adapting technology to support effective personal development
- The support required by participants to develop their reflective thinking and reflective writing skills
- The need for participants to manage priorities: i.e. to give sufficient attention to their professional development while meeting the demands of their "day job"

## **The destination**

With completion planned for November, 2010, the Thanet College team is now focused on a review of the positive impact made by the initiative upon:

- Personal and professional development
- The student experience
- The institution as a whole

The development of the initiative has been a real team effort and Geoff acknowledged the invaluable contribution and support provided by JISC TechDis, together with the self motivation and commitment of the College participants.

**Paul Manning, the College's Head of Improvement and ITQ participant,** commented:  
'Using e-portfolios has pulled together several staff improvement activities into one place and given real coherence to staff development in meeting College goals, e-learning skills, completing e-CPD and improving the confidence of staff in their role. The resources available through the JISC e-Learning programme have provided significant support for the development and implementation of the initiative.'

## **Links**

[www.thanet.ac.uk](http://www.thanet.ac.uk) <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/services/about/casestudies.aspx>

[www.pebblepad.co.uk/practice.asp](http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/practice.asp) (available via YouTube)

## **Relevant JISC Resources**

Effective Practice in a Digital Age (JISC, 2009)

[www.jisc.ac.uk/practice](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/practice)

Effective Practice with e-Portfolios (JISC, 2008)

[www.jisc.ac.uk/media/document/publications/effectivepracticeportfolios.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/document/publications/effectivepracticeportfolios.pdf)

Effective Practice with e-Portfolios workshops

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/eportfolios/workshops.aspx>

JISC Techdis

[www.jisc.ac.uk/techdis](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/techdis)

The College uses its own instance of Pebble Pad: this connects with Reflect through the importing of assets from one resource to the other, for IfL purposes, only.