South Eastern Regional College wins Beacon Award for technology

Gemma Ellis	Welcome to the Jisc podcast. The AoC Beacon Awards took place on 17th November celebrating best practice in further education. Jisc sponsored the award for effective use of technology in FE, which this year was won by South Eastern Regional College in Northern Ireland for its BLADES programme which uses peer mentoring to support the digital capabilities of staff and students. We speak to Paula Philpott, ILT pedagogy mentor at the college, to find out about the programme and what it means to win the award.
	Tell me about the solution that you've implemented at the college.
Paula Philpott	Well within South Eastern Regional College what we've done is try and look at ways in which we can re-engage our learners. Specifically we focused initially on essential skills which is our literacy, numeracy and IT students, and we wanted to find ways in which we could really re-engage them with their learning. So we wanted to harness what technology enhanced learning had to offer, but we realised that to do that we needed to ensure that the staff had the digital capability to actually implement the technology effectively in the classroom. We had a team of peer mentors who were appointed into their mentoring role based on their pedagogical skills and their skills with technology, and from there they would have then go out and taught the class of the mentee. The mentee would have observed and we would have got student feedback and then that would have fed forward in terms of the training that we would have given to the member of staff. Then we would have a team talk with them and, again, got student feedback. That feeds forward and more training's given, and then finally we observe and then teaching. And what that does is take ... could possibly be abstract training and actually give it a context and it's embedded within the curriculum with these specific students. So that was one strand of the approach.

Then from there we also then looked at the range of technologies that would be most appropriate for those learners. So we looked at gamification, game based learning, e-assessment.

We looked at different ways in which we could get them collaborating online and just a range of assessment and content knowledge approaches that would help support their learning. To do that then we made sure that each tutor had an individual virtual classroom site on Moodle, so they have their own Moodle page, and what we found over the five years that we were tracking and monitoring the programme we found that achievement rates increased by 13% across the organisation, because we rolled the approach out across the whole of South Eastern Regional College, and across the organisation our Moodle hits increased by over 500%. So last year for instance in '14/'15 we had 4.1 million Moodle hits, 26% of which were outside of the college. So there was a range of measures that we put in place and the peer mentoring programme became very popular and we had a waiting list of staff wanting to use it. So we thought we needed to look at more informal ways in which we could support the tutors as they implemented the new strategies and approaches. One of the ways we did that was really looking at how we could grow the blended learning activities that were happening in class and so we introduced Moodle Mondays, which focuses on blended learning in the context that they could use the activities that could be hosted within a Moodle platform, and then webinar Wednesdays which was an opportunity for staff to share good practice of what's happening in the classroom. Those are webinars that are run. Wednesdays are run live and recorded and made available to staff on our SERC media platform. So there was a range of approaches really, both formal and informal, which supported the learning agenda across the organisation.

Gemma Ellis So the approach that you've chosen, was there any particular reason for choosing it? Was it to address a particular problem that you found?

Paula Philpott The research had shown that, where staff are given workshops or staff development days, they can prove to be largely ineffective in the long term in terms of embedding those approaches in classroom practice, because often the training is too abstract and decontextualised for staff to be able to get a handle on what can this technology do for me in the classroom. Also we really wanted to make sure that it was married very much with the pedagogical approaches. So what we wanted to improve was their technological pedagogies, and to do that we felt we needed to harness the student voice. So for us it was really important that whatever training we put in place was very much based around the classroom and so we wanted what would in effect become workplace learning. So we had this team of peer mentors that we appointed as we said, and that approach became more effective because what tutors saw was an opportunity to see what that would like on the ground, rather than be given training and have an idea of what it might look like, but actually be able to see someone else teaching their students using those approaches and then they were able to give feedback and students were able to give feedback and that fed forward in the process. It's a kind of supportive process because you've got the mentor there who'll team teach with you and peer observe you, but it's very much around the teaching and learning strategies and the technologies that are going to support the learning.

Gemma Ellis   It sounds like it's sort of based on a feedback from people approach. What's the feedback been from staff and students in using it?

Paula Philpott   The feedback from students and staff has been really positive. I know that when the assessors for the awards came out they had a focus group of students that they were talking to and they said, "If these approaches weren't here, what would that be like?" and one of the students said, "It would be like cutting off my right arm." Sometimes we forget just how important a range of approaches are to helping students who struggle maybe with their literacy, their numeracy skills to re-engage with their learning. Because the students fill in feedback forms at the end of each classroom session, the feedback forms have to be quite simple because we've got learners from level one through to level six, so they're asked about whether the approaches helped them learn that day and, if it didn't help them learn, why didn't it? And also then would they like their teacher to continue using these approaches and often they say, "It was really fun,", "It helped me really engage." Because it's so much about the pedagogy and the technology they say things like, "It makes us interact more. It helped me engage more". One of the maths students had said, "What was so useful is that often I'm in class and I remember it in class, but when I leave class I forget again. So being able to go onto the Moodle platform and to access the resources and maybe to play the games and to reinforce the learning after class has really helped, that when I come back into class a week later I remember much more than I did previously".

In terms of the tutor feedback I think probably one of the nicest things is that we always have a waiting list for the mentors of staff who want to be mentored. Because we work with part-time tutors as well as permanent staff the feedback just says, "It gave me more confidence. I'm part-time. It made me think about how I could use ILT in the class to cater for most learning styles and to make the sessions more interesting." "The mentor afforded me the opportunity to look closely at the pedagogy of my lessons and revealed how through ILT learning could be enhanced and enriched." Someone said, "My mentor's been fabulous. Perhaps this is one of the main gains of the process, experiencing what excellent student needs focused and supportive true mentoring is all about, and again the mentoring gives you the confidence and support to try out new things that you wouldn't normally try. It's training tailored to my classroom". I think that's what's unique about it, that it's bespoke. It meets the tutor at the point of their need and it provides that just in time training for them.

Gemma Ellis   There's clearly a lot that other colleges can learn. What would your advice be?

Paula Philpott   I think there's lots of things that we've done and all of the initiatives in themselves had merit, but I think it's creating that culture where there's a workforce that want to really develop and to see professional development as something that's continuous because often we find that over the five/six years that we've been running the programme in the mentoring, we've had over 400 staff through the mentoring programme with over 1600 classroom sessions, and what's it done is create a culture where staff want to learn more about how technology can be used to improve learning and teaching. And it's that supportive process around them, but also harnessing the tools that there are out there, helping staff to realise that it is worth taking a risk to try something

new, even if initially it means upskilling yourself in terms of your technical skills to be able to use that tool, that actually the long term benefits do come. And harnessing the student to let them tell you which things are worth investing your time in, what things they would like to see their tutor using just to improve learning and teaching. I think wrapped round that then is just that staff support mechanism, so having peer mentors who are there to change what happens in the classroom, so moving away from a CPD model that's purely about delivery to one that looks at the sort of holistic overview of how we support tutors in the classroom.

We've been able to rollout the ILT pedagogy mentoring programme in another essential skills team in Northern Ireland and things like our online enrolment, which we designed our own online enrolment system and we've implemented that in another college. We provided training to an Irish college on peer mentoring and we've been doing research on the peer mentoring alongside a Japanese college, and we've been out to speak at some learning and teaching conferences in Singapore and, again, we're travelling out to Japan to deliver training. So I think that's just been a recognition of sort of the whole area of teacher education and professional development has been something that I think everyone is trying to look at the most effective ways in which we can do that. I think the benefits to other colleges really are in terms of cost savings in travel and training from using those informal learning opportunities and through our learning engine, our online platform for staff training, and also then through webinars like Moodle Monday, webinar Wednesday. I think it has improved the digital literacy skills of our staff and also of our students, and it's created sort of learning agility amongst our tutors. Also then I think the whole college approach has meant that it's really in line with our strategic vision of where we are at as a college.

Gemma Ellis   And what does it mean to you to win the award?

Paula Philpott   We were so excited. I think ultimately we knew what we were doing and we knew the effectiveness on the ground, and in one sense if we hadn't won we still were so proud of what we had been achieving as a college. But actually winning just is a chance for us to say to staff look at how far we've come, how much we've been able to do, and just to genuinely take a moment to pause and say this is fantastic. We do realise that we have such a strong digital capability within the organisation and we've taken so many sort of steps to improve and enhance the learning and teaching, and I think that that is evident in the student feedback and in the overall culture within SERC.

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