South Eastern Regional College:
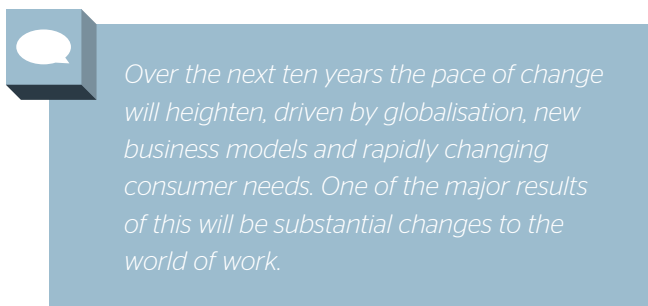## A whole college approach to developing digital capabilities

Background

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) (serc.ac.uk**)** is a large, dynamic regional FE College in Northern Ireland. It has 1,100 employees and 32,000+ enrolments, helping them to achieve over 20,000 qualifications and over 2,000 work placements every year. 97% of its FE students progress to higher levels of education or employment on completion. SERC works in partnership with 33 schools across most of County Down and the greater Belfast area, enhancing their curriculum and ensuring that learners have access to vocational education.

The College came into being in 2007/08 through the merger of three pre-existing colleges. There were major redevelopments at six of the existing seven campuses, which meant that after a period of disruption there were opportunities to move forward with an integrated strategy and new infrastructure.

SERC has always been a strategic leader in developing the digital capabilities of its staff and students. Its work featured in a previous **Jisc case study (**http://ji.sc/digital_student**)** for the Digital student project, and as recently as 2015/16 the ILT Pedagogy mentoring and essential skills team won an **AoC Beacon Award (**http://ji.sc/association_of_colleges**)** for its blended learning programme in essential skills.
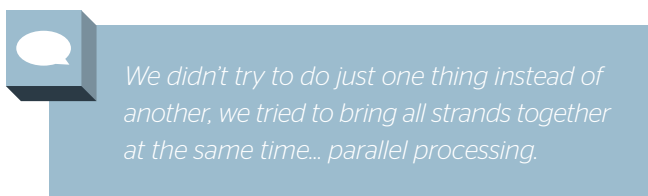
Strategic priorities

The College has developed its strategy to support the Department for the Economy's (DfE) **Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland,** which identifies a pressing need for more workers to be skilled at levels 4 and 5. **The College Development Plan 2015-18 (**http://ji.sc/SERC_development_plan**)** notes that:

> *Over the next ten years the pace of change will heighten, driven by globalisation, new business models and rapidly changing consumer needs. One of the major results of this will be substantial changes to the world of work.*

In addressing these changes, the College is committed to enhancing the digital literacy of staff and students and supporting that through infrastructure and systems development.

At the time of merger, the college decided to create a common Moodle platform, and to take a coherent, strategic approach to staff development around that infrastructure.

> *We didn't try to do just one thing instead of another, we tried to bring all strands together at the same time... parallel processing.*

Leadership of change

SERC is a multi-campus College but has taken a strategically centralised approach to quality enhancement, curriculum design, and data management. For example, there is a 'one college, one course' philosophy applied to Moodle course design. Data and information systems are highly evolved to allow target-setting and live monitoring of progress. This ensures real-time information is available for decision making and is presented in ways that all staff can visualise and understand.

Staff are just used to going in and interrogating an app to get the information they need. So, for example [staff at] case conferences would have key information about students including qualifications on entry, attendance, likelihood to success, actions to support retention from the case conference app.

SERC's strategic focus on developing the digital leadership of curriculum managers has been a major contribution to the success of the overall strategy. These managers, alongside their curriculum teams, evaluate the quality of the learning experience on Moodle and in the classroom, as well as setting and monitoring targets for each course site. Other important aspects of digital leadership include real-time monitoring of key metrics, and tracking the skills development of staff through the SERC Learning Engine.

We have a culture of staff and curriculum managers all having the same key skills set... That is important in terms of moving in the same direction.

Actions for digital capability

Once the decision had been taken on the Moodle platform, a series of templates were created for HE, FE, Work Based Learning (WBL) and Essential skills courses. These were developed collaboratively with teaching staff and students, and they focus on including interactive learning elements such as game-based learning, e-assessment with feedback, peer-to-peer activities and collaboration. Staff training was put in place to bring everyone up to a baseline standard.

Concurrently, some staff were encouraged to develop and experiment with new ideas and tools, to share practice, mentor one another, and develop new approaches together.

In the last academic year, SERC's Moodle site received 4.2 million views, 23% of them from outside the College's campuses, so students clearly feel that the materials are valuable and that the platform is integral to their learning.

Observing lessons is a key part of the strategy to support course teams and staff. There are many opportunities for observation within staff development and appraisal and the internal quality cycle, and for some years these have included a specialist ILT Pedagogy mentoring programme. Mentors provide six hours of training, and will also team-teach, observe and offer feedback as staff adopt new approaches with technology. Students are involved in providing feedback on their learning during every observed session.

It's through the classroom sessions and the mentoring programme that we continually focus on student needs. It's supportive and confidential, so tutors are keen to hear what students say.

Students are involved in providing feedback on their learning experience and the technologies being used. Best practice is also recorded during classroom sessions and this provides a rich resource for teachers as they seek to implement new strategies in the classroom.

Moodle Mondays and Webinar Wednesdays use a webinar platform to share good practice. Recordings are shared via SERC's media channels, and social learning takes place through the Yammer network. These give staff access to informal peer learning a time and place to suit them.

The College has also developed a wide range of bespoke apps to support the day-to-day activities of staff and students. These include for example the 'Self-evaluation report' app, the 'Case conference' app to monitor student progress, and the 'My timetable' app showing students their attendance record. Whatever the task, *'Our first port of call is often our app centre'.*

There has been a considerable investment in human resources and expertise to support the provision of CPD. SERC has a large (10+) and experienced e-authoring team who develop resources for staff. As a result of this investment the College has saved revenue on third party training and CPD resources because of the quality and volume of in-house digital materials.

> *We would use e-authored content for student-facing resources but we try to develop the digital literacies of our staff. We know that in terms of sustainability it's better for staff to have the skills to create their own content.*

The IT infrastructure team, Software developers and Systems development team are also critical to enabling innovative ideas to be realised in practice. There is an extremely low turnover of staff in these teams. Thanks to this supportive environment, the Learning academy manager notes that the learning agility of the workforce has *'accelerated significantly'*:

> *Often they are driving change now... they know what they want to do and will come with specific ideas eg they might want to create a community of practice for film studies students: they will want it to have a facebook look and feel, but to be securely monitored. So they have the language and inspiration to describe their specific needs.*

Moving ahead

SERC are constantly piloting new plug-ins to improve the functionality and learning experience on the Moodle platform. There is a permanent test bed where staff can try out new features and a rolling programme of app development. Currently the College is piloting a Moodle App which will enable students to work offline when they do not have a reliable internet access outside of College. There is also work under way to allow students to track their progress across all their modules via Moodle.

Teaching staff have been experimenting with games-based learning to engage students studying at level 1 and level 2, and problem-based learning is encouraged across subject boundaries to support a 'learning by doing' approach. This requires a more agile approach by teachers, who bring in different activities and resources as the need arises. Moodle modules have previously been designed as discrete units but now require a more holistic and flexible view.

> *But here you have engineers working with the performing arts and computing on projects that go across the different subject areas. We have begun to look at a whole college approach.*

Design and quality assurance of digital learning materials has been handed off to teaching staff. The evaluation – at Platinum, Gold, Silver or Bronze - was initially carried out by the Head of the learning academy, then in subsequent years by curriculum leads, and is now being carried out by Moodle mentors from among the teaching staff.

Opportunities and challenges for the future

The new curriculum requires teaching staff to respond to the learning needs of each student in relation to their chosen projects and pathways. This is a clear challenge to established practices and uses of the VLE. But there are opportunities if technology can be harnessed to provide a more personalised approach.

> *We are trying to find tech that is relevant to the individual so they have a currency in terms of their own digital skills. That is something we have specifically focused on, especially with regard to project-based learning.*

SERC have placed a significant emphasis on developing their virtual learning environment and app-based infrastructure. This makes them a valuable test-bed for other colleges, but does mean that there has been significant investment in technical development.

SERC is now developing the role of digital literacy in enterprise and employability, two key challenges for the College and for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Lessons learned

» SERC has achieved a very high level of staff digital confidence by investing in CPD at scale, in particular through their specialised digital developers (centrally and on the distributed campuses), and buying out the time of experienced staff to act as mentors

» Peer mentoring – with the full engagement of students as collaborators – is perhaps the gold standard of effective teacher professional learning. SERC has shown great commitment to this practice

» The centralisation and continuous development of IT systems has had many benefits as administrative activities are simplified and app based. Staff and students are seeing the benefits of having learning-related data at their fingertips

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Any unattributed quotes in the text were provided and have been approved by the contacts above.

For more information
on all related resources please see the Building digital capability project page.
http://ji.sc/building-digicap