

E-mentoring at Oaklands College, St Albans

“One thing is absolutely clear. We’ve got 21st century learners [with] pockets full of stuff that let them learn together ... that let them be imaginative and creative. They’re not going to power down to come to learning. So if we don’t power up learning to meet them where they are they’ll get on with learning – it just won’t be with us.”

Professor Stephen Heppell

“At a recent staff meeting I explained to everyone that we had no choice other than to embrace the new technology. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have a job in five years time. It wouldn’t be me putting them out of work, it would be the students. They would refuse to be taught in any other way.”

Mark Dawe, Principal, Oaklands College, St Albans, quoted in BECTA annual review 2007

Mark Dawe believes that learners will turn away from formal learning if the technology used at the college does not match or better that which learners use at home. To prevent this happening at Oaklands College, recent investment in technology has meant that every classroom is now equipped with an interactive whiteboard and the college is piloting a scheme to loan a laptop to every full-time learner for the duration of their course. The college encourages learners to post their work on websites such as YouTube and MySpace and has increased the capacity of its network to accommodate this.

For some teachers*, the technology is a challenge and not all of them embrace it wholeheartedly. Their more experienced colleagues are there to support them but help also comes from a less obvious source: ‘e-mentors’.

E-mentors are learners whose technical confidence and ability to acquire new skills means that they are ideally placed to help learners and teachers alike to exploit the potential of the new resources. Any misgivings that teachers might have had at the reversal of roles has apparently evaporated in the light of the e-mentors’ problem-solving skills and practical suggestions about making better use of the college’s virtual learning environment.

The intention is to provide the e-mentors with training so that they can pass on their technical expertise.

Using the learners in this way recognises their expertise and provides them with valuable experience to record on their CV. In requiring them to articulate their thinking, show persistence and creativity and be flexible in their approach, it also enables them to refine their expert learner skills.

*We use ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘teacher’ as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.