Working in partnership with students to promote digital literacy and innovation at City and Islington College

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Organisational context

City and Islington College is a large Further Education College located in the London Borough of Islington, delivering over 800 courses and apprenticeships to approximately 18,500 students. The College comprises five purposely-designed centres, each with its own specialism and community of students, teachers and staff: Applied Sciences, Business Arts and Technology, Health, Social and Child Care, Lifelong Learning and the Sixth Form College.

The College serves a diverse community with levels of social and economic deprivation in the top quartile in the UK. Many of our students have complex lives and face multiple barriers to education. The College was graded as 'good' by Ofsted at its most recent visit (February 2016) and received positive comments about partnerships, employability and support for students.

The College has recently merged with Westminster Kingsway College to become part of the Capital City College Group.

Background

Jisc defines digital literacies as "the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society" (Jisc, 2015). A key recommendation from Jisc is that colleges and universities work in partnership with students to develop digital literacies. The College Principal, Anna Douglas, had been keen for us to set up a Digital Ambassador Programme as this aligned with the College Strategic Plan (2014), but we were not sure how best to approach this. We decided to research what others were doing. This included attending the Jisc Change Agents' Network Meet-Up in June 2016, where we learnt about a variety of student partnership initiatives. These included the Digital Voice Experts at Epping Forest College, the Student Digistars Team at Bishop Grosseteste University and the Digital Student Advisory Group at the University of Lincoln.

Each institution had taken a unique approach to engaging students in promoting digital literacies. For instance, at Epping Forest College, students ran helpdesks in the libraries and uploaded training videos to Planet eStream. At Bishop Grosseteste University, students ran focus groups, trained staff and explored mobile technology for enhancing teaching and learning. At the University of Lincoln, students supported classroom observations by evaluating a lesson or VLE course, delivered workshops and invited in guest speakers. We were particularly inspired when hearing from students themselves about the contribution they had made and how this had helped them build both personal and professional attributes.

On returning from the meet-up, we decided to investigate the student experience of learning technology at City and Islington College and to gauge interest in a possible partnership initiative of our own. We sent out a survey, open over the course of three weeks, and received 130 responses. Students responded to the survey on a range of devices, with a majority of sixty-two per cent using smartphones. Students gave interesting feedback on their favourite apps and social media and shared what digital tools their teachers were using and what apps they found useful for their studies (TeachLearnDigital, 2016). They also made suggestions as to how digital technology could be used to improve their studies; some emailed us directly to express an interest in working with us to promote digital literacy and innovation.

We agreed a project plan to pilot a Student Digital Ambassador Programme between October 2016 and July 2017 and invited staff from Student Engagement, Library and Careers to offer their advice and support. In September 2016, we advertised for student volunteers through fliers, social media, enrolment and welcome fairs. Students were provided with a job description and asked to email with an expression of interest and reasons why they thought they would make good 'Digital Ambassadors'. We were looking for students who enjoyed helping others, liked learning about new technologies and social media and wanted to enhance their study programme and gain valuable work experience.

Project specifications

The main aims of the Digital Ambassador Programme were to develop digital literacies in learning and teaching and to drive change and innovation. At the same time, we hoped to promote student engagement and employability and to improve staff confidence and insight into student needs.

We wanted to work in partnership with our Digital Ambassadors in all areas of the project including planning the type of support they could offer. However, we decided to shape the programme around some of Jisc's good practice principles (*op.cit*, 2015) for promoting digital literacies, as well as our own strategies for student engagement and employability.

Whilst a flexible approach was important, the main areas we chose to focus on included:

Student voice

- Communication with students about their digital experience
- Feedback on student use of technology for teaching, learning and assessment
- Review of latest educational tools and apps
- Supporting training

Skills for life

- Digital identity and online safety
- Communication skills and social media
- Developing creativity and independence
- Learning through reflection

Skills for study

- Preparing students to study
- Supporting access and inclusion
- Helping students use their own devices for learning
- Progressing and maximising students' digital capabilities

Skills for work

- Analysing needs
- Project management
- Providing a training service
- Creating and sharing resources

Discussion of pedagogy/practice

At the time of writing (May 2017), we are currently working in partnership with nine Student Digital Ambassadors from across the College. Since the students, who are enrolled on a range of A Level and BTEC Level 1, 2 and 3 vocational programmes, have varying availability, we have split them into two groups and meet each on a weekly basis, either on Mondays in the Centre for Business, Arts and Technology or on Wednesdays in the Sixth Form College. Volunteering hours are logged on 'ProMonitor', our institution's student tracking system, and count towards students' study programmes. At the end of the year, all students who have successfully completed the programme will be awarded a certificate and a reference summarising the skills and experience they have gained.

A six-week induction period during October of the first term of 2016 included a series of workshops and students who had an expressed an interest in becoming a Digital Ambassador were invited to a welcome session. Students learnt about the aims and benefits of taking part and discussed what roles a Digital Ambassador might take on at the College. Students completed a *Socrative* questionnaire about their existing skills and any experience they would like to gain. Students also reviewed and commented on findings from our student digital-learning survey and fed back on their own experience at the College (verbally and on *Padlet*). At the end of the meeting, students signed an agreement which outlined expectations for taking part and commitment to the programme.

In the second meeting, students explored team work, communication and social media. During this session, we discussed the importance of effective communication when working in teams and different types of communication. We also identified the benefits and drawbacks of various types of social media. We agreed how we would communicate with each other and with others about our service. Students joined *slack*, channels were set up and tasks were assigned. Finally, we discussed how to recommend tools to staff and students and how to reflect on and evidence our work. We concluded that Digital Ambassadors should all be given permissions to contribute to the Digital Learning Team's blog.

The following week, using *Kahoot,* students checked their understanding of how to interact safely online. We reviewed who had done what from our task list in *slack*. We then analysed

the training and support needs of students at City and Islington College, planned our priority topics and discussed the feasibility of a helpdesk. Students felt that there was no real demand for a helpdesk providing general support to sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds and that training should be designed to respond to specific needs. However, we decided that we would provide a helpdesk as and when required to support teachers, adult learners or students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

In the fourth week of the programme, students explored the Digital Learning Team's blog and were shown how to add a post, select categories and submit their work for review by the Digital Education Consultant. Students then submitted blog posts on apps that they would recommend either for independent study or enrichment. As a group of 'ESOL(16-18)' students (a programme for sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds), had now expressed an interest in digital skills training, we discussed how to go about researching their specific needs.

In the fifth week, we set up a simple training-needs survey on *Typeform* and forwarded this to the Head of ESOL to distribute to his students. Digital Ambassadors were then shown how to plan a training session by looking at an example workshop designed by the Digital Learning Team. This included learning outcomes, session titles, timings, activities and resources. They were provided with a workshop template and then practised designing training of their own. One group designed a Twitter session for Marketing students and another designed a Snapchat session for teachers!

In the last week of the induction period, students were shown how to access and download survey submissions so that they could analyse data submitted by ESOL students. They agreed a topic for the first ESOL student training session – 'How to use MyCandi' (the student intranet) – and then designed a one-hour workshop on accessing College webmail, checking one's timetable, viewing announcements and downloading the 'MyDay' app on tablet or smartphone. They also designed a feedback form.

Implementation

In the last week of the autumn term, students ran their first workshop for twelve ESOL students, which went down very well. The students provided very positive feedback on how useful they found the training and what other training they would like. Digital Ambassadors said they really enjoyed the experience and were excited about continuing to help other students to develop their digital literacies.

There was also a real buzz when students launched their service at the College Christmas TeachMeet. Four Digital Ambassadors presented to teachers about what they had done so far and what they could now offer. Students distributed a flier to promote their service. It was clear that teachers and senior managers were impressed with the students and there was plenty of interest in taking advantage of their skills and expertise!

Since then, our Digital Ambassadors have been busy working on a variety of initiatives. For example, they have prepared and run student focus groups on the use of technology for teaching, learning and assessment. They have provided a project manager with feedback on the usability of *ProMonitor* and suggested possible improvements. They have suggested to an employability adviser how she might update her web presence. As part of 'We are all

Immigrants', an event to celebrate diversity and promote inclusion, they have set up an interactive map and run a helpdesk to support its use.

They have also designed and delivered further digital skills workshops for ESOL students, including sessions on *MyProgress* and *Moodle*. They have trained Health and Social Care students in *Evernote* for individual and collaborative notetaking and in *Google Forms* for research. They are also to run sessions on podcasting and simple video-editing for a small group of teachers wishing to develop their own digital skills.

Furthermore, our Digital Ambassadors have explored and blogged on various apps for learning and enrichment. They have tested such new learning technology as the H5P interactive video plugin for *Moodle*. Some of our students have helped us storyboard and produce an interactive video tutorial to support staff training in Equality and Diversity. Other students are due to work on a summer project for librarians creating learner guides for eBook platforms and testing out virtual reality for *Google Expeditions*, while others have agreed to create resources for Careers staff including 3D tours to promote the World of Work.

Of course, one of the intentions of the Digital Ambassador Programme is to inspire staff and students to drive change and innovation. Part of this involves connecting with industry. So far, our Digital Ambassadors have attended the BETT show, a 'Geek Girls UK' and 'Tech for Good' Meet-up, a talk on 'Turning Your Passion into a Business', an afternoon at Microsoft and a workshop on Cybersecurity delivered by Barclays. *Makerclub* has also agreed to deliver a workshop on rapid prototyping, robotics and revolutions. Digital Ambassador events are open to all staff and students and this has been a wonderful opportunity to nurture partnerships inside and outside the College.

Evaluation

This year's Digital Ambassador Programme is still in progress, but we have carried out some formative evaluations and collected some informal feedback from staff and students along the way. In the spring, I asked students to record on a *Padlet* what they thought they had gained from the programme and they listed a number of skills, including team work, designing and delivering training, public speaking, taking part in focus groups, blogging and reflective learning. When they were asked what their favourite experience was so far, their responses varied from individual to individual. Some enjoyed delivering training to other students because it improved their confidence; others liked visiting events such as the BETT show, exploring tech start-up ideas, trying out different software and technology such as virtual reality. Others preferred researching and blogging about new apps. When asked if they had any suggestions as to how to improve the programme, one student said she would like to test more products and have the chance to develop useful applications for the College. Students told me they would like to attend more events and have expert speakers come in to give talks or run workshops to help them develop their knowledge and upskill others. Another suggestion was that there should be more flexibility in terms of the delivery of sessions.

Attendance at meetings has been very good overall and we have been impressed by the enthusiasm and creativity of our students. Students received high praise from our Principal at the Christmas TeachMeet and they were described as 'the stars of the show' in a College

newsletter. Ambassadors have received very positive feedback on the workshops they have delivered and supported so far and their contributions to College initiatives have made a genuine difference. With competing demands on students' time, we are aware of the inherent challenges involved in running extra-curricular projects, as well as in maintaining commitment. A couple of students withdrew quite early on, but other students were keen to step in and a couple agreed to act as virtual/floating ambassadors to support the team whenever they could. Once ambassadors could see the relevance of the skills they were developing and the positive contribution they could make, they seemed motivated to carry on. Working in partnership with teachers and support staff and taking part in meetings to discuss, plan and evaluate initiatives have a real impact on student engagement. One student explained that she had enjoyed this because "I felt like my views were really valued". Also, students like the idea of writing for and being published in a blog aimed at teachers inside and outside the College.

The recent Digital Ambassador events have also been a great success: there was a much-appreciated trip to Microsoft and, one afternoon, thirty-three students and four members of staff from across the College came together to learn about apprenticeships and internships, coding and the 'Internet of Things' (IoT). Students also competed in a 'Dragons' Den', in which College staff collaborated with interns to act as 'dragons', deciding which team should win. The winning team was a group of girls from the Sixth Form College who won drones for their pitch on IoT-enabled gloves. There was a definite buzz and plenty of staff and students asked when the next event would be! One lecturer told us: "I think some of mine will consider a Digital Marketing course at university because of yesterday".

In conclusion, our Student Digital Ambassador pilot has involved trying a little bit of everything to find out what works. We shall carry out a fuller evaluation in the summer to consider how far the programme has helped to develop digital literacies and innovation, promote student engagement and employability as well as to improve staff confidence and insight into student needs. We shall explore the impact of the project on learning and teaching, both successes and what could have been done better, so that we can make informed decisions for the future.

What next?

The future of the Digital Ambassador Programme looks promising. There is now more awareness around the College about the Digital Ambassadors and we have more concrete examples of what they can do. For instance, the Head of Equality and Diversity would like the students to produce more learning resources and our Learning and Development team is keen to explore joint initiatives. The programme has certainly helped us to build capacity for delivering digital skills-training and projects. At the same time, we are keen to ensure that we work efficiently by linking to strategic priorities. In the summer, we shall be launching a staff digital-leader network, an opportunity for further partnership work related to teaching and learning. We should also like to promote the service to new teachers, perhaps arranging digital-ambassador observations on the use of technology inside and outside the classroom.

One challenge this year has been managing the resources needed to coordinate the programme across different sites for students with varying timetables. One idea would be to delegate this responsibility and to promote those ambassadors who will be returning next

year to digital leaders. Another option would be to offer more flexible placement opportunities.

Finally, we shall need to find ways to sustain motivation for students in the second year of the programme. We are already looking at competitions such as London Metropolitan University's 'Big Idea Challenge' or Jisc's 'Student Ideas Competition'. After watching Janina Dewitz present at the Jisc 'Surf Knowledge Exchange' on #LEARNHACK at UCL and hearing others talk at a 'Tech for Good' meet-up, we should love to host a Hackathon of our own! There are indeed many amazing projects for which our College community could volunteer, so as to develop our digital skills and make a difference.

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