



Vision to Reality

By Richard Everett

Oaklands College's new building 'Vision to Reality' promises to be radical and ambitious. It has invested significantly in its gradual rolling out to staff and students through a multi-faceted scheme of training and support – in advance of occupation. This has particularly been facilitated by the active encouragement of new ways of working and fostering an 'Innovation culture' within the college. The college website has a dedicated area for the design of the new build which can be found at:

<http://www.oaklands.ac.uk/about/newbuild.aspx> The conference material includes 2 presentations entitled '**Richard Everett – Combined New Building Vision and Reality**' as well as '**Richard Everett - New Building CLCs**'. There is also a wealth of material describing the new building and the [eMentors](#) concept available on the 'intelligentbuilders' channel of Youtube and various websites:

Recommended supplementary material - New Build:

<http://www.oaklands.ac.uk/about/newbuild.aspx>

<http://www.silicon.com/publicsector/0,3800010403,39254168,00.htm>

http://www.computacenter.com/case-study/080520_Oaklands.asp

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/inform22.aspx#amazingspace>

<http://jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2008/07/podcast47richardeverett.aspx>

Recommended supplementary material - eMentors:

<http://www.ifl.ac.uk/services/docs/1214/IfLcsOaklandsCollege.pdf>

<http://publications.becta.org.uk/download.cfm?resID=33625>

http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/conference/Default.aspx?Page=nomenu2008L_VATonyBurgess

Optional further reading/detail:

Videos and presentations on the 'Vision' and 'Reality' of the new build process can be downloaded from:

<http://oaklearn.oaklands.ac.uk/download2/jisc/>

The investment in the technology and associated resources requires an equally significant investment in Continuing Professional Development and training. However, while training can give tutors the skills to use the various technological resources – laptops, interactive whiteboards, classroom voting systems, mobile devices, and so on, only a cultural shift can make this eLearning strategy a reality. Management of this cultural change requires a holistic approach that works from the top down and the bottom up simultaneously. At Oaklands there is strong leadership from the top, made obvious for example, by the principal and his team trialling the new open-office, hot-desking agenda; and from the bottom up with students demanding a more technologically-rich learning experience and leading the way by mentoring the teachers in IT skills. More and more, staff are dipping their toes into the eLearning pond and finding that the experience is empowering and rewarding.

It is clear that culture change is an ongoing process. Staff at Oaklands are supported in this process through a multi-faceted approach into which the eMentor scheme fits snugly. It is hoped that the impact of the change brought about by the infiltration of IT into this workplace will be lessened by the trialling of new systems and the offering of support at every stage. The following list of the types of support and trialling of new working practices is not exhaustive:

- Many elements of the learning and teaching environment that are planned for the new build are already being trialled. [Curriculum Learning Clusters](#) and open plan, hot-desking work spaces are in place on selected campuses and the feedback so far has been very positive.
- There is a strong program of [Staff Development](#) that has been modified to reflect staff feedback about accessibility to sessions and relevance to their everyday job requirements.
- The [eLearning and Technology Support](#) team provide a customised training and support service for all tutors both in the classroom and dedicated training rooms.
- Each team has an [eChampion](#) to cascade good practice and support other team members in developing their eLearning practice and

- A [Pack of Cards](#) has been produced, the first in 2007 and another in 2008, which contains a collection of Helpsheets or eLearning activities that are written by the tutors themselves demonstrating what can be managed by busy teachers.

Into this mix of support and training is added the development of a culture of innovation which encourages tutors to imagine what they would like to do and bid for funding to bring it to reality through the colleges self funded [eLearning Capital Innovation Programme](#). This funding uses the College's own funds to help staff develop systems or trial methodologies which utilise new and innovative technology that can be applied in the new build.

The support mechanisms have been used extensively by staff in 2008 and this is measured through a combination of

- an eLearning tracking sheet kept by the eLTS team that records all training and eLearning consultation – group, team or one-to-one;
- the curriculum leaders' Self-Assessment Reports which have an extensive eLearning component,
- a new course grading system which rates the VLE courses as Bronze, Silver or Gold depending on the amount of activity and
- a traffic light system which incorporates the data collected from Observations of Teaching and Learning reports, the eSkills questionnaire that staff completed, use of eMentors, information gathered from the eInterventions student feedback survey, and other available resources.

Curriculum Learning Clusters (CLCs)

Optional further reading/detail:

A video and presentation on CLCs can be downloaded from:

<http://oaklearn.oaklands.ac.uk/download2/jisc/>



The Curriculum Learning Cluster at the Welwyn Garden City campus is a new learning and teaching environment that has been designed to allow students access to a Learning Resource Centre, eLearning and Technology Support, administration and Learner Services from one central area.

For the new build, CLCs are planned to be placed in each of the curriculum areas' wings and one for HE and 'A' level learners.

Carol Howard, Head of eLearning and Resources and designer of this radical space, says:

“The new CLC is giving us all the opportunity to try out the ideas and plans and to learn what works and doesn't work for both learners and tutors so that we can plan exactly what we will need in the new build.”



The decoration is bright and modern and the furniture is varied and completely mobile to re-arrange as tutors require.

Lecturers have reported that the CLC has had a positive impact on learners' behaviour and attendance. Previously easily disruptive classes showed a noticeable difference and were seen to be on task and learning. One lecturer commented that the layout of the CLC made him more creative in his teaching methods; another felt that the



flexible layout allows for differentiation as learners can choose where they want to sit to get on with a task.

The learners commented that the décor was relaxing and they liked the bright colours and informal group seating area. It was noticeable that the learners were interacting with each other more and collaborating in their learning tasks.

Some learner comments on the new environment:

“The fun social learning area makes you feel at ease and you don’t feel you have to learn but rather want to willingly.”

“A great atmosphere for group work, it looks great and is a good room for learning.”

“The idea of using laptops is brilliant for comfort and mobility.”



Continuing Professional Development

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) includes all the learning that staff is required to undertake as part of the job, for example, initial teacher training, health and safety training, or training in the use of the electronic resources; together with learning undertaken in work teams, for example, training on a new IT system or managing challenging behaviour. It also includes the individual professional development activities that are agreed with the manager as being important for the role and recorded in the Personal Development Plan at the time of the annual appraisal. The third strand of CPD is the professional and personal development that staff choose to undertake in their own time, at their own expense, for personal interest or in preparation for a career or lifestyle change.

Developing skills and knowledge is an essential part in improving the quality of service Oaklands College offers, both within and outside the college and there is a strong commitment to supporting the development of all staff wherever they work. This 2008/2009 year the focus of staff development will be towards achieving the targets set out in the Post Inspection Action Plan, as well as many programmes, workshops and courses related to

general development. This is essential as the demands of the job expand to include a range of IT resources that must be managed and the skills required to incorporate increasing opportunities for innovative and creative solutions to learning and teaching that will be utilised in the new building.

In response to staff feedback, the Staff Development calendar is currently being run on a four-week rotation of planned training sessions; the training sessions are also being run twice a week as many staff found one session a week difficult to get to. The rotation includes a week of self-directed training where the curriculum areas can arrange training with the eLTS team who will tailor a session for the specific needs of the group. This is a very successful format and the attendance at Staff Development sessions is higher than in previous years.

The Continuing Professional Development team, with a very pronounced pedagogic focus, try to ensure that programmes are relevant, high quality and meeting the needs of staff (and importantly students); every role in the college is seen as a professional appointment that is valued by the organisation. Whether the role is teaching, looking after the estate or administering learner record systems the college needs everyone to take advantage of the CPD programme in order to develop and expand their professional skills. In that way staff gets the most out of their work and the college benefits from having a confident, highly skilled and effective workforce.

eLearning and Technology Support (eLTS) team

The College has an effective eLearning Strategy in place and has set up a team of e-skilled, eLearning support staff to support the use of ICT in learning and teaching. This includes the post of eLearning Development Leader, which is shared by two trained teachers, one of whom still teaches exemplary grade one in the curriculum and has excellent understanding of the practical implications of using eLearning effectively in the classroom.

The eLTS team, whose members are either teachers or training to be teachers, provide one-to-one or group training sessions to help the tutors develop tools and resources for their own particular classes including using Oaklearn (Oaklands Virtual Learning Environment) , interactive whiteboards, online games, PowerPoint, podcasts – any resource that will help to keep the learners engaged and on task. They will also go to the classes and assist with mechanical issues like setting up the wireless connectivity or helping the teacher use any of the digital resources available (ably supplemented and assisted by the eMentors team).

Each eLTS team member has the responsibility of managing the eLearning for a few curriculum areas which includes attending team meetings, suggesting resources, identifying and organising training needs and generally acting as a consultant for the curriculum area for developing an online teaching and learning presence. The team is also very active in the Corporate Staff Development calendar and plans / runs sessions related to eLearning resources and delivery.

eChampions

Each curriculum team is invited to nominate an eChampion; someone within a teaching team with an interest and enthusiasm for eLearning rather than expert knowledge. The object of the eChampion initiative is to encouraging the diffusion of eLearning skills and resources within learning teams by fostering the enthusiasm of individuals within these teams. The eChampions meet together once a month as part of the College's Staff Development programme to exchange ideas and examples of good practice and to develop their skills in an aspect of eLearning that they deem most relevant to their teaching. Following any training they are expected to pass on to their colleagues any tips, skills or resources that they think will be useful. A further advantage of the eChampion initiative is that it gives eLearning managers crucial access to curriculum teams in order to disseminate information, to monitor staff perceptions and to collect feedback on any issues or successes.

Pack of Cards

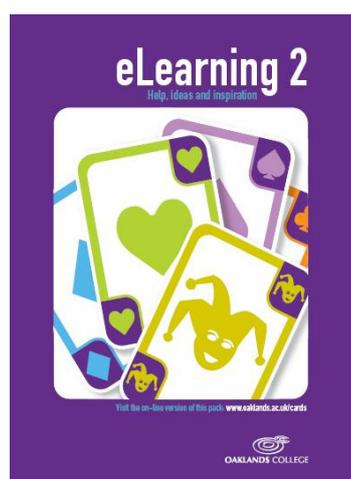
Optional further reading/detail:

A .pdf copy of both the first and the second of the 'pack of cards' can be downloaded from:

<http://www.oaklands.ac.uk/cards>

A further initiative to encourage the dissemination of eLearning practice is the Pack of Cards project. Good examples of eLearning activity are collected by the eLearning team and these practitioners are invited to

complete a simple template in which they outline what their eLearning activity was, why and with whom they did it and why it was successful. These templates are then collated and presented as a 'Pack of Cards' – to provide help, ideas and inspiration. Some of these



series

good

'cards' are like helpsheets or menus of activity that other staff could emulate. Others are case-studies of successful eLearning activity. In either case, the virtue of the project is that the cards deal with concrete, tried-and-tested classroom activity which has taken place at Oaklands College not with some generalised ideal of what *should* or *could* be happening. The cards also provide a way of acknowledging and rewarding those staff who have show initiative and innovation at work.

eInnovation funding:

The 'eLearning Capital Innovation Programme' projects build upon the work of the existing eLearning Strategy which aims to identify how eLearning can benefit learners, practitioners and educational institutions, and advise on and facilitate its implementation. Its goals are to achieve improved quality of learning in the college through:

- Supplying practitioners with confidence and skills in managing and facilitating elearning in different contexts and with different pedagogical approaches utilising new and innovative technology
- Facilitating the implementation of a technical infrastructure that supports flexibility, diversity and extendibility
- Providing easy access to high quality, flexible learning materials
- Ensuring that effective and responsive e-learning policies, systems and structures are in place within in a supportive and innovative context.

Its vision is to build on previous work undertaken in the eLearning area and it aims to assist practitioners in supporting learners with different needs, experiences and preferences through the design of pedagogically sound learning activities utilising new and innovative technology.

The 'e-Learning Capital Innovation Programme' fund aims to:

- Review and investigate how learners experience and participate in learning in technology-rich environments.
- Make recommendations for those involved in the support of student learning (including practitioners, support staff and institutional managers) on how best to support learners, based on our understanding of the diverse needs, experiences and preferences of learners.

- Help eLearning developers to design systems that support a wide range of learning tasks/interactions, meet different learner needs and enable positive learning experiences.
- Investigate the strategies, beliefs and intentions of learners who are effective in learning in technology-rich environments.
- Develop methodologies for eliciting the learner experience and promote learner involvement in evaluations which practitioners can use to inform their designing for learning (e.g. use of eMentors).
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning in the college using electronic means, and
- Utilising new and innovative technology in a sustainable manner.

Some of the projects that have run include:

Ability in Disability Programme - Helping students develop increased confidence and independence in and out of work through mobile technology

Developing Learner participation in formative assessment of their speaking skills – to provide opportunities for learners to receive formative feedback on their speaking skills and to create a lasting online portfolio of their oral work involving both simple, digital handheld recorders and intensive work with PDAs across all ESOL classes

Health Bytes – Accessing and developing a variety of youth-orientated, interactive, health and enrichment e-messages to students by displaying them on the desktop of 300 college computers for a year.

Video Diary Kiosk – Using a portable video kiosk to encourage feedback from learners so that the quality and learner experience department can elicit student participation in the quality process.

Wikis, a great way to get learners to write! – An ESOL Entry 3 class created collaborative non-linear narratives in a wiki on the VLE to develop writing skills across a variety of genre.

eMentors:

The role of the eMentors (students who teach the teachers to use the technology appropriately) in the process of enculturation into a world of interactive learning activities and

games; Web 2.0 applications; multimedia resources; and anywhere, anytime learning cannot be understated. They are part of a concerted approach to developing the online capabilities of all staff in the college in order to cater for a cohort of digital natives who expect and demand a multi-faceted approach to the learning environment.

Optional further reading/detail:

A video and presentation on the highly innovative eMentors scheme can be downloaded from:

<http://oaklearn.oaklands.ac.uk/download2/jisc/>

The eMentor scheme, which uses the students to teach the teachers how to use the technology appropriately, was devised by Richard Everett and is to be first line of support in the classroom. It means that the tutors can collaborate with their students and introduce IT resources into their classes and be more relaxed knowing that there is someone on hand who can troubleshoot hardware and software issues if necessary.

Although it was thought that staff would initially be resistant they have embraced the eMentor scheme and individual tutors have included their eMentor in the planning of a class and the preparation of class notes to be uploaded onto the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Classes with eMentors have shown increased success rates of an average of 6% and many eMentors have commented that the interaction with their teacher has had a positive effect on their learning.

The eMentor scheme is now a national phenomenon and Richard Everett and some of the eMentors have been invited to speak to other colleges about the program and recommend its implementation. There has been widespread interest in the program which has been the focus of a report on the [BBC](#)¹, in the Times Educational Supplement ([TES](#)), on [Teachers TV](#)², a case study for the Institute for Learning, centre page spread in the [Becta Annual Review](#)³, regional support by the [JISC RSC](#)⁴, and more recently recognised in an award

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7029727.stm>

² <http://oaklearn.oaklands.ac.uk/download2/ementorsmain.wmv>

³ <http://publications.becta.org.uk/download.cfm?resID=33625>

⁴ <http://oaklearn.oaklands.ac.uk/download2/newsbytes%20nov%202007.pdf>

from the Centre for Excellence in Leadership – [Tony Burgess Award](#)⁵, as well as some items soon to be published on the LSC Technology for Learning Good Practice site (currently found on [YouTube](#)⁶).

Conclusion

Oaklands College's journey to create a new building with a learning environment that appeals to the learner and the community is underway and the results are beginning to show. Since 2003 the College has worked hard to turn the around the unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection grade, and in 2007 the grade was Good. There is a strong commitment to continue to make changes that improve the College and ensure an improved facility for learners, staff and the community.

The Vision is that by 2011 the new buildings will be complete which will ensure that Oaklands is providing an outstanding environment for the best learner experience and highest quality teaching. The way of working will be different and will maximise the resources. It is expected that 2011 will see:

- Outstanding Learning and teaching
- New College with excellent facilities
- Oaklands will be the best

This clear strategic vision has been implemented with energy and consistency by a new principal supported by a director of eLearning who have created a culture of innovation, excellence, and 21st century technology. Every aspect of the college organisation was critically evaluated in the context of the vision and new working practices were introduced to manage the increasing demands of a college of the future. Information Technology became central to the operational side of the college and there was increasing pressure on the tutors from management and the students to integrate IT into their learning and teaching practices.

The implications of such IT-induced cultural changes were widespread with some staff embracing the change whole-heartedly and others resisting. Further detail about this can be found in the Stratclyde University 'Work with IT' project report and vignettes.

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<http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk/conference/Default.aspx?Page=nomenu2008LVATonyBurgess>

⁶ http://uk.youtube.com/results?search_query=intelligentbuilders&search_type=&aq=f

Optional further reading/detail:

Information from the Work with IT project can be found at:

<http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/work-with-it/CaseStudies/EMentorsDigitalNativeStudents.aspx>

The role of the eMentors in this process of enculturation cannot be understated. They are part of a concerted approach to developing the online capabilities of all staff in the college in order to cater for a cohort of digital natives who expect and demand a multi-faceted approach to the learning environment.

The learners at Oaklands College are starting to shape the future as they see it. The eMentors have shown that a high level of trust and collaboration between the teachers and learners can benefit all. This collaborative, social construction of learning which fosters a deeper understanding of the work is already happening in classes and students are reaping the benefits of being active participants in their learning. These practices will segue into the new learning and teaching spaces of the new build and become part of an outstanding environment for the best learner experience and highest quality provision.

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(with thanks to Barbara MacFarlan without whose efforts this paper could not have been published).

Postscript Note: For a historical perspective of the hub and spoke theory upon which the Oaklands New Build is based please see the supporting paper "Building a learning environment to meet the needs of the 21st Century" presented by me to the first FERL online conference some 4 years ago.