

# Case study

## Oaklands College

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Faced with the challenge of supporting more than 600 staff to use technology in the classroom and workshop, Oaklands College in Hertfordshire deployed a team of student e-mentors to help. The idea was based on the tendency for younger people to have more confidence with electronic gadgets, computer equipment and software. The e-mentoring scheme was launched in 2006, and students have been assisting lecturers and fellow students whenever necessary.

Richard Everett, director of elearning at Oaklands and mastermind of the e-mentoring concept, said, “Our scheme works on the principle that the person in the household who knows how to use the DVD player is, more often than not, the child. And the same is true with information technology. Because young people take technology for granted, they see it as just another tool and are not frightened of finding out how to use it when they do not know – they just try.”

The scheme has proved to be a great success, helping lecturers overcome their insecurities about technology, while at the same time empowering and engaging students. The e-mentors can be called to help with everything from assisting lecturers with equipment such as laptops, projectors and electronic whiteboards, to encouraging fellow students to make use of the college’s virtual learning environment (VLE) and reporting IT faults to the helpdesk.

### Objectives

With more than 600 staff to support in the classroom and workshop, the elearning and technology support team at Oaklands College needed help. Richard Everett says, “We wanted to improve the usage of technology and the quality of provision. We needed an effective way of supporting the use of technology. If we could also move away from the sage on the stage approach to one of a guide on the side, that would be an additional benefit.

“Using students to teach teachers in something at which they were very adept seemed a logical – if controversial – approach. We wanted to improve retention, achievement and success using the technology recently installed into every classroom and workshop. As part of a £400,000 investment programme, all staff have been issued with a laptop, every classroom and workshop has an electronic whiteboard and projector, and a wireless network is available throughout the estate.”

### Implementing the scheme

Richard says that staff were expected to be resistant to the new scheme – they would surely feel threatened by the thought of students ‘taking over their lives’. The converse was true. Once the scheme was running, staff perceptions changed very quickly, since the students proved their worth almost immediately.

In order to recruit e-mentors, the elearning and technology support team advertised for student volunteers. The rewards on offer included a USB pen drive with a special lanyard, as well as a guaranteed reference and extra print credits. Later, the college was able to offer other mobile phone equipment as an incentive too.

The senior management team was highly supportive of the scheme.



“I find that most lecturers are relieved to have my help; any problems can be resolved quickly and they can get back to teaching.”

James Belmont has been an e-mentor for over a year. He is currently studying for a foundation degree in ICT and multimedia at the college and finds his e-mentor role very rewarding.

“I am very keen to work in IT once I am qualified,” he says, “and I saw the e-mentoring scheme as a chance not only to help others less comfortable with technology – which I enjoy doing – but also for me to gain valuable work experience.”

James is on hand during his classes to assist teachers if necessary and is often called to other classes, when he is not in lessons, to help with the ICT equipment.

“I find that most lecturers are relieved to have my help; any problems can be resolved quickly and they can get back to teaching.”

“Students are also happy about the arrangement, because they know they can approach me with a problem and get back to their studies once it has been resolved. Also, if regular issues arise, I can take these back to our e-mentors meetings, where we try to resolve recurring problems so that they don’t happen so frequently in future.”

### Evaluation

Richard says that the scheme has exceeded expectations. By the end of the 2007-08 academic year, there were 42 e-mentors, and 75 per cent of the courses in which they were present increased their success rates, by an average of 6 per cent.

In 2008, 48 per cent of courses have e-mentors and 93 per cent of staff and students who took part in a survey said that having an e-mentor was good, very good or excellent.

“Other benefits are that e-mentors now directly inform policy,” says Richard. “They support e-mentors in other schools and colleges, and are regularly involved in working with VIPs visiting the college – for example, the DIUS board, Ofsted, and a delegation from Oman. This has, according to e-mentors, positively changed the dynamic in the classroom, towards more of a peer relationship.”

There have been some lessons along the way. “As a bribe, the USB stick didn’t work as well as we had expected,” admits Richard. “We have now supplemented that with a £10 music voucher for attendance at group meetings. I also wish that we had been able to implement this scheme much sooner, but it needed high-level support, and a new principal and senior management team have helped make the idea reality.”

### Impact

Changes were evident very quickly, within just two weeks of introducing the scheme. In the short term, the college has seen an overall increase of 6 per cent in success rates, with 75 per cent of classes increasing their success.

In the longer term, Richard anticipates that the scheme will become embedded into the ordinary working of the college, rather than as a project. This will eventually mean 100 per cent coverage – all staff will get the support they need to use technology in their teaching.

Richard remembers taking three e-mentors to the AoC technology conference as a particular highlight. “The conference was all about digital natives,” he says, “and of course, the e-mentors were digital natives themselves. They gained a huge amount from participating in the event, and the conference benefited from their input.”

### Benefits

A main benefit for the learners involved in the e-mentoring scheme is that they have gained a skill that they would not otherwise have learned on their course, and this has boosted their self-esteem.

As a result of this experience, one student on an IT course has decided he wants to teach IT. Another student, who is taking a health and social care course, has gained a lot of confidence in public speaking, and acknowledges that this has widened her employment opportunities considerably.

Richard says, “Teachers benefit too, from gaining skills that they would not have had the time to learn separately, because this is on-the-job learning. The effective use of IT is having beneficial effects on the college, and success rates are up. Publicity about the e-mentors has encouraged innovation in other areas.”

### Conclusion

“This whole exercise has taught me to trust the students a lot more,” says Richard. “They are excellent ambassadors for the college and they gain so much from the experience as well – it is a win-win all around.

“My advice to other colleges? Just do it! Innovation can be fun – even if it’s a little daunting when you first start. Young students are not frightened by technology – they just play with it until they know how it works.”

Natalie Renshaw, an e-mentor, agrees. “I’m a very practical person, so if something isn’t working, instead of standing there flapping, I like to meddle around and you get through it eventually”





## OAKLANDS COLLEGE

### Oaklands College

Oaklands College is a large, general further education college, formed from the merger of three colleges in south and mid-Hertfordshire in 1991. It has four major campuses at Borehamwood, St Albans, Smallford and Welwyn Garden City.

The college supports more than 17,000 learners, of whom over 80 per cent are studying part-time. It also caters for school pupils drawn from 13 local schools on a range of vocational courses, as well as learners following modern apprenticeships.

The college's mission is to be 'first choice for learning and skills'. It aims to deliver stimulating, resourceful, and high quality learning and training, providing the best possible opportunity for its students to succeed and fulfil their potential.

For those in employment, the Oaklands experience enables them to progress, and employers benefit from their employees' enhanced skills as a result. Oaklands College works with employers to ensure their skills needs are met in the most effective way possible.

Oaklands is nationally recognised for the learning and training it provides and for adopting innovative approaches to fulfil its mission – particularly in the area of elearning. Oaklands makes a significant contribution to its community and provides appropriate opportunities for all those whom it serves.

[www.oaklands.ac.uk](http://www.oaklands.ac.uk)



“Since introducing new technology, we are already seeing improvement in our year-on-year grade attainment.”

### Embracing new technology

“It is fantastic that the students involved in this e-mentoring scheme are not only helping us immensely to ensure that new technology is used smoothly in the classroom, but they are also gaining valuable work experience, which will benefit them greatly when looking for work, once they have finished their studies.

“Since introducing new technology, we are already seeing improvement in our year-on-year grade attainment. For example, with the 2007 A-level results, we noticed a 17 per cent improvement in AS-level business studies and biology grades; subjects where e-mentors are used regularly.

“I have advised my teaching staff that they have no other choice but to embrace new technology. If they didn't, they wouldn't have a job in five years' time. And it wouldn't be me putting them out of a job, it would be the students. They would refuse to be taught in any other way.”

**Mark Dawe, Principal**

### For more information:

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