

‘I’d never even thought about teaching’: how a master carpenter carved out a career in further education

Originally published in a paid partnership with the Guardian Labs

Matthew Cappell, head of the construction school at Moulton college in Northamptonshire. Photograph: Christopher L Proctor/The Guardian
When work dried up in construction, Matthew Cappell fell into the world of further education teaching – and soon discovered a passion for sharing his skills with the next generation of learners

by [Emma Sheppard](#)



Matthew Cappell, head of the construction school at Moulton college in Northamptonshire. Photograph: Christopher L Proctor/The Guardian

Matthew Cappell has had to get used to proving himself. At just 24, he found himself teaching an evening carpentry class to students some 20 years older than he was. “I think they were a bit surprised when I walked

in,” he says. “But after I demonstrated a skills test – cutting skirting boards on a jig by hand – they realised I knew what I was doing.” Fast-forward 10 years and Cappell is now the head of the construction school at Moulton college in Northamptonshire, making him one of the youngest on the leadership team.

Despite progressing quickly up the ranks, teaching in further education (FE) is actually Cappell’s second career. He spent seven years working on building sites all over the country until the recession hit. “I’d never even thought about teaching,” he says. “But in 2010 my boss said he didn’t have as much work for me any more and Rugby college offered me a few days as a technician. Pretty soon they asked me to work five days a week and it just spiralled from there.

“To be honest, I wasn’t expecting it to take off the way it did, or to enjoy it as much as I have.”

Cappell’s own experience at school was a tale of two halves. He attended an all-boys’ school in Coventry and enjoyed it, but in year 10, he was diagnosed with dyslexia. “I could read pretty quickly, but I’d always had trouble spelling and with grammar. Getting the diagnosis was a relief, everything made a bit more sense and I got a bit of extra time in exams, which helped me process the questions better.”





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After school, Cappell enrolled at Rugby college to study carpentry. “I was like a duck to water, I loved it,” he says. “There’s obviously some theory involved, but I liked that there was something tangible coming out of every class.”

Once he qualified as a carpenter, Cappell quickly expanded his knowledge to help with bricklaying, tiling, fitting kitchens, plastering, and more, in building sites of all sizes countrywide. “It was something different every day.” But there were downsides as well – the time away from home was not always welcome, and then work started to dry up when the recession hit. Getting a job in FE seemed like a good way to pass some time until things picked up again.

As a technician, Cappell was initially responsible for maintaining the safety of the class machines and pre-cutting the timber for students to use. He quickly progressed to helping teach practical lessons and evening classes. He moved between the sites of the Warwickshire College Group and Coventry college, where he spent time as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) workplace assessor, visiting students working on building sites. “It was really nice to see learners in their workplaces, putting the skills we were teaching them at college to good use,” he says.

Although he had no formal teaching qualifications when he started, Cappell has since completed the Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning

Sector (CTLLS), Training, Assessment and Quality Assurance (TAQA) and Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) qualifications. He took these alongside his teaching and all were paid for by the college.



'I'm designing a curriculum that gives the industry and my learners what they need,' says Cappell

In his role at Moulton college, he combines more than 11 years of FE experience with his passion and knowledge of his sector, managing 30 staff and being responsible for approximately 600 students. “Everything construction-related falls under me – carpentry, bricklaying, plumbing, electrical maintenance operations, stonemasonry, furniture and construction management,” he says. “It’s making sure I’m designing a curriculum that gives the industry and my learners what they need.” And when he gets the chance to be in the classroom, he’s there like a shot. “I still love it. I’m really keen to meet the next generation of carpenters coming in.”

Cappell’s story might sound exceptional, but he believes the skills you develop working in construction are perfectly transferable to teaching in FE. “When you’re working on site, you have to be resilient, you have to be organised. It might rain or materials might not turn up, so you have to find something else to do. And that can happen in teaching. You have to have that ability to problem solve and think on your feet.”

For anyone who’s keen to share their skills with FE learners, his advice is simple: “Do it. Just jump in wholeheartedly. As long as you’re confident and you can talk about your subject passionately, students will respond to you.

“It’s giving back really, isn’t it?” he adds. “Someone took the time to teach you, it’s now time to pass those skills on. I love meeting students who come into class thinking they can’t do something, seeing them progress and then getting that sense of achievement. It’s very rewarding.”

Your skills are more valuable than you realise. If you have relevant experience working in industry, you can start teaching in FE with no formal teaching qualifications. To find out how you can change lives without changing careers, head to teach-in-further-education.campaign.gov.uk