

Ideas for using ICT in adult and community learning

This briefing sheet is based on the experience of TrEACL projects (Technology to Enhance ACL) 2003 – 2005. These projects were funded to enable ACL providers to experiment with the use of technology in adult education and the briefing sheet summarises their ideas and new practice in preparing materials, lesson planning, integrating the use of technology in classroom learning, supporting learning outside the classroom, and delivering learning online.

“The seeds of possibility opened up are tremendous. The opportunities for innovative and exciting learning and teaching techniques are boundless.” A comment from a tutor working for Portsmouth City Council after attending an e-learning staff development course supported by TrEACL funding in 2003-4.

E-learning has been defined in many ways. The e-learning standards document from Lifelong Learning UK, which replaces the FENTO standards, puts forward the following: “*E-Learning is learning supported or enhanced through the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)*”

Although the ‘e’ in e-learning is normally considered to stand for ‘electronic’, a recent JISC publication, ‘Effective Practice with e-Learning’ (HEFCE, 2004) equates the ‘e’ in e-learning with ‘enhanced’, and offers a useful list of the technologies encompassed:

- desktop and laptop computers,
- software, including assistive software
- interactive whiteboards
- digital cameras
- mobile and wireless tools, including mobile phones
- electronic communication tools, including email, discussion boards, chat facilities and video conferencing
- Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

These technologies have recently become more common in adult and community learning. This publication also provides a useful context for evaluating e-learning; it is: “*a conscious choice of the best and most appropriate ways of promoting effective learning*” and effective practice should:

- engage learners in the learning process
- encourage independent learning skills
- develop learners’ skills and knowledge
- motivate further learning

Why use e-learning?

There are many reasons why the introduction of e-learning in the adult and community learning (ACL) sector is important. Adult learning has a very strong link to the skills strategy and there is no doubt that fostering the development of ICT skills in the adult population has an impact for those seeking work and enables engagement with e-citizenship. The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has found the sector lacking in adopting a variety of teaching methods and techniques and it has been a long tradition within the sector that the different learning styles of adults should be recognised and catered for within the adult classroom. E-learning offers the opportunity for personalised learning, working at your own pace and at your chosen level. In addition, many adults engage in learning in order to develop ICT skills that the younger population have acquired at school or at home.

Prior to 2003, there was very little e-learning taking place in ACL and there was little or no dissemination of the outcomes or impact of using technology. The majority of ACL tutors had no access to technology in their workplace and nor did their learners. Awareness of e-learning developments in other sectors, or elsewhere in the post-16 sector, was low. (Potential of e-learning in ACL, NIACE 2004).

As the managing agents for the extension of the National Learning Network initiative, NIACE adopted a three year plan to widen the use of e-learning in ACL. This included supporting a number of innovative e-learning projects that would trial ideas and assessing their value. In 2003-4, 23 projects were supported by the Technology to enhance Adult and Community Learning, (TrEACL) funding stream, and in 2004-5, a further 32 projects were awarded funding, followed by 32 small-scale content creation projects (Content for ACL, CACL). Local authority providers were also offered the opportunity to buy software for content creation under a funding stream called Tools for Adult and Community Learning (TACL).

E-Learning in ACL in practice

A number of factors influenced the opportunities to trial innovative ideas when the TrEACL projects started. Clearly, the resources available to staff differed widely, and there was little knowledge base of effective e-learning. Use of PCs, laptops or Internet connectivity in the classroom often required additional timetabling, booking of equipment and the development of staff skills, but there was enthusiasm for new ideas. Some of the most basic ideas included improving the quality of resources that tutors use in designing lesson content for learners.

Preparing lessons

The Internet is a rich resource for tutors, providing up-to-date statistical information, reports, news and views to inform lesson content and a source of existing learning materials. Some of these resources are free, and some can be downloaded and possibly re-purposed.

It is not the purpose of this briefing sheet to recommend or analyse particular websites or subject gateways; however, the resource exchange for ACL on the aclearn website [www.aclearn.net/content/exchange/] is a good starting point, with an extensive set of links to materials that have been selected with adult education in mind. This exchange is growing all the time and the innovative projects funded as part of the National Learning Network initiative are encouraged to submit materials developed to this site for review and use by the ACL sector. The resource exchange is also designed to be a

repository for lesson plans and schemes of work, tools for materials development and assessment as well as an area where staff can recommend sites they have found particularly useful and describe how they have used them. Images have extensive uses in teaching and learning and can bring learning activities to life – again there are many Internet sites that provide sources of copyright-free images, and the aclearn website has its own image gallery [www.aclimages.net/aclearn] where images can be shared.

Handouts

Using word-processing software to create handouts improves quality and reusability of resources. By improving the ICT skills of tutors, and enabling access to PCs in the workplace or through laptops for teachers schemes, tutors can produce professional materials to support their teaching which can be shared, re-purposed and updated with ease.

If access to the Internet can be arranged in the classroom, or if learners have access to the Internet elsewhere, then online learning materials can be used within the class itself. The purpose of these learning activities can vary from the introduction of new learning points, to reinforcing learning, or as a source of information for learners to report on and exchange amongst themselves. Internet research can be structured into an activity known as a webquest. A webquest is a learning activity whereby most or all of the information used by the learner is obtained from the Internet. Background information on webquests, including examples, can be found on the aclearn website [<http://aclresources.net/webquests>] or the San Diego State University website [<http://webquest.sdsu.edu>] The aclearn website also contains an online generator for webquest creation. There are a number of advantages of using this very structured approach rather than general research on the Internet - the tutor is aware of the learners' sources, all the learners share the same information, and those that are still developing Internet skills will feel more confident with the activity.

Digital Photography

This has proved to be a popular and versatile technology that offers many opportunities for creating appropriate and relevant learning materials. A TrEACL project in Brighton utilised both stills and video cameras to develop materials and language exercises for ESOL learners. The learners were encouraged to take cameras with them on walks around the city, they then reviewed the footage and described in the classroom to create learning materials for giving directions around the city. The reports of this work can be found on the MOREfrinds website [www.morefriends.org.uk].

In a small voluntary sector organisation delivering learning for learners with learning disabilities, cameras were used to record activities that then acted as a learning diary. The results were both instant and striking. It offered the learners an instant and professional-looking learning record that would otherwise be very difficult for them to construct.

A number of arts and crafts tutors also use digital images to display both finished works and works-in-progress. The benefits, or 'e-learning advantages', include a visual record of improvement – from the initial attempt at the work to the finished project, motivation for the learner to achieve something worth publishing to the wider world, and in some cases the development of an interest in photography and ICT. In addition, the cataloguing of work offers an opportunity to understand how web pages are constructed. TrEACL projects in North Somerset, Hull, and Cornwall. utilised digital photography in

this way. For an example of an online gallery showcasing learners work, visit the Cornwall art online gallery website [www.cornwallartonline.co.uk].

In Portsmouth, yoga tutors used digital images of their learners to demonstrate how learners had progressed towards the proper adoption of poses. Despite some initial reluctance, learners soon found this way of recognising the pose and their own progress towards it a worthwhile learning experience.

Interactive Whiteboards (IWB)

The interactive whiteboard (IWB) is a popular choice of technology and has been described as a 'fantastic teaching medium' by the Sheffield Open Door project where the whiteboard is used in craft classes. The use of IWBs is increasing as tutors gain access to this type of hardware. Learners can participate in creating presentations or documents, which are displayed and visible to the whole class. It is easy to incorporate work from groups of learners and easy to correct mistakes made. Source material for lessons, such as Internet pages or images, can be quickly referred to. Use of a wireless keyboard or mouse in conjunction with the IWB also gives learners the opportunity to control and interact with the display without having to come to the front of the class.

In Wandsworth, a backlit IWB is used with learners with learning difficulties who are engaged in creating videos of their trips to the local shopping centre and library. The group are engaging in learning ICT skills, especially how to use the Internet, and enjoy group sessions around the board to practice these skills. Robust and easy-to-use cameras are taken out on trips and the images are then collated into short movies which have voiceover and text descriptions added. The group are currently working towards creating their own web pages to record their experiences. Development of independent living skills is one of the learning outcomes.

Software to support e-learning

The availability of different software packages to aid the creation of interactive learning materials motivates many tutors to learn how to use them to enhance their teaching, thus improving their own ICT skills. Software packages such as courseGenie, Hot Potatoes and Question Tools have been specifically designed to enable the user to create highly interactive content, without the need for advanced computing skills. Standard word processing and presentation software packages, such as those found in Microsoft Office, can also be used to create such activities. Drag-and-drop, matching, cloze tests and multiple-choice are all within the reach of a moderately skilled tutor and can be used in the full range of curriculum areas. Extensive use of this software has taken place in modern foreign languages.

One TrEACL project in Devon chose to create a series of materials for learners to use for self-assessment, and reported:

“Learners were engaged by the tools. Four of the five tutors using the tools reported that learners, once started, were keen to continue the assessment to the end and contrasted this with more traditional assessment methods where a number of learners abandon assessments early.”

Tutors also felt that the materials provided a quicker way of highlighting individual needs, and were a useful indicator for the learners themselves highlighting areas that needed more revision and attention.

The use of software to create electronic learning material also enables learners to access material by different methods; tutors can email their learners, or post them to a website, intranet or learning platform. This enables learners to revise and refresh their learning and to catch up if they have missed a session.

A project in Peterborough used bespoke music creation software to enhance the classroom activities in a singing lesson and to measure the learner's progression. The project reported that learners' understanding of musical composition, and the ability to develop harmony and orchestration can be improved by entering a simple diatonic melody and adding a second part. Learners evaluated their compositions within the class and performed and recorded their output.

Another project in Knowsley developed a ten-unit beginners course called 'Revise your Spanish', which was produced and distributed on CD-Rom. The tutor and project manager created a storyboard and content for the course and commissioned a software development company to produce the CD-Rom. One of the aims of the project was to support the study of Spanish in the home, and thus improve the quality of learning in the classroom. By involving local people in the production of the CD-Rom, as 'speakers', the project manager reported an increased uptake on the Spanish courses, and an additional benefit of raising the profile of the centre, which also attracted learners to other courses.

It is important to note that the aim of the material was not to supplant the face-to-face delivery in the classroom but to provide an alternative means of accessing the course content. There is a strong design emphasis on the spoken language and all the text can be heard as well as read so that learners are not disadvantaged though poor literacy skills. Reading and numeracy activities in English demonstrate the embedding of Basic Skills/Skills for Life activities. The CD-Rom has a tracking feature that enables learners to easily check what they have done, and the project highlighted the development of skills for learning.

Commissioning a software development company is clearly more expensive than developing materials inhouse, but can be an effective means of developing a quality learning resource that can be easily distributed and copied. A CD-Rom has the obvious advantage that it can be used where there is no access to the Internet. More professional software production can also offer some fun interactivity – the Spanish CD-ROM has lots of entertaining graphics, and in the Isle of Wight, a family history project has devised some highly graphical 'How to be a History Detective' material for use by different members on the family .

Online learning

In Lancaster, two courses were developed for online access through TrEACL projects, creative writing and Spanish. The former was delivered remotely and enabled access to learning that would otherwise have been impossible as learners were unable to attend a face-to-face course due to mobility and other health difficulties, or geographical distance.

In the West Country, a course in permaculture, (the practical design system for sustainable living and community development) was delivered over one month, with 18 hours online and two face-to-face days. It proved to be very successful with good retention and positive evaluation from learners.

Learning Platforms, a term which can cover intranets, Virtual or Managed Learning Environments, have become increasingly available in ACL and many tutors have been able to experiment with different ways of making elements of their courses available online. An additional benefit of the use of a learning platform is the improved communications it can offer between groups of staff and between staff and learners. Resources can be shared and discussion tasks undertaken through the use of forums or web-boards. One project has modelled the use of such forums on the Open University approach promoted by Gilly Salmon and has found that the integration of online tasks into the course structure is the key to ensuring the learners continued involvement. Asynchronous communication can often encourage reflection and time to absorb learning, as well as having the advantage of accessibility 'anytime'

A TrEACL project which sought to utilise a new opportunity in e-learning was 'Blogging for Learning – Using Weblogs with Adult Learners' undertaken in two London boroughs. A 'blog' (or weblog) is a website consisting of regularly updated entries, in this case, displayed in reverse chronological order – in effect a personal on-line diary with the latest entry at the top. The project aimed to use blogs as a way for adult learners to reflect on their learning experiences and develop writing skills. Learning groups involved in this project included a literacy class, an ESOL class and an NVQ childcare class. This project provided some evidence of the benefits for basic skills/ Skills for Life of using technology in the classroom as learners reported:

'It [writing using the keyboard] is much easier than when I use a pen.'

'It has helped me to write in sentences, including using commas and full stops.'

Using blogs was considered to provide a 'real' context for writing, and it was felt that the project had significant learning benefits. In the ESOL class, retention was improved above average. One interesting comment from a learner in this class who had previously studied via learndirect was that 'blogging' provided a more open and creative approach to e-learning. In the childcare class, a group blog was used to record the resources researched as part of their course, such as recipes and nursery rhymes. Outcomes of this project suggest that blogs can be a successful and enjoyable way for learners to record their achievement, and that the context of 'web publishing' provides both motivation and value.

Showcasing learners' work

Motivation can often be encouraged through the use of technology to create a 'product'. Both CD-Rom and online resources have been utilised to display and celebrate learners' achievement. One example of this was the CD-Rom 'Our Lives' produced in Stockton. This included music and stories told by ESOL learners and text that described their experiences. Through participating in the creation of the CD-Rom, the learners engaged in a number of new activities that offered opportunities for language development, and worked hard to ensure their written texts were revised and perfected prior to recording. Presentation software can be used to create multimedia records of learning – sound files, images, video clips, text and hyperlinks can be easily incorporated and only requires access to a computer and projector to display the results.

The use of technology and e-learning in ACL continues to move forward and break down barriers to learning. There are many exciting and rewarding projects and resources being created, and as the technology and access to it increases, so too, will the global-library of resources and enhancing experiences.

NIACE contacts

Alastair Clark, ICT and Learning Development Officer
Email: alastair.clark@niace.org.uk

Susan Kozicki, ICT and Learning Project Officer
Email: susan.kozicki@niace.org.uk

For full reports on current TrEACL and CACL projects see: www.aclearn.net/content/treacl A CD-ROM showcasing the project work will also be available in Autumn 2005.

References and useful resources

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This is the sixty-second in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

57. Mailgroups
56. What is online learning?
55. How do I become a teacher of adults?
54. Mobile ICT resources for older learners
53. Extended schools and adult learners
52. Adult participation in learning
51. The NLN and adult and community learning
50. Fees charged to part-time adult students 2002-2003
49. Sources of funding for adult learners.

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21 De Montfort Street

Leicester, LE1 7GE

Tel: 0116 204 4289

Email: information@niace.org.uk

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