

Researching and running online courses within adult and community learning

A summary of a series of investigations and projects

"...the challenge is not simply to incorporate learning technologies into current institutional approaches, but rather to change our fundamental views about effective teaching and learning and to use technology to do so" (Hanna et al, 2000)

Online learning is gaining in popularity in sectors such as Higher Education and is seen by many as the future of learning and education. This briefing sheet describes the findings and outcomes of the Online Course Delivery Project, an initiative by NIACE to introduce online learning into adult and community learning provision.

Introduction

The Online Course Delivery project (initially named the Development of online courses with full online support) was funded by the Learning and Skills Council between 2006–2007. Its aims included:

- to undertake research into the potential of introducing online learning in adult and community learning
- to develop online modules and programmes in order to enable practitioners to introduce online learning within their organisations and support their learners effectively.

Five reports were produced, detailing the outcomes of the project. Their findings are described below.

Research into the potential role of online learning within the Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) sector

Two research reports were produced, *The potential for introducing online learning in adult and community learning provision* and *The potential of online assessment in non-accredited adult and community learning*.

The potential for introducing online learning in adult and community learning provision

This report used a literature review, interviews with experts, the results of a national survey and a review of existing internal data to support its conclusions. The report found that the main benefit of online learning was flexibility for the learner, enhancing the possibilities of learning within a space, place and time most convenient to them. Online learning could also promote greater access to learning and had the potential to enhance the learning experience through enabling new and effective modes of learning. Possible barriers included learner feelings of isolation and a need for effective technical support.

Key to success

Blended learning was found to be the most effective form of learning, combining the flexibility of online components with the tangible sense of support and collaboration offered by face to face contact. Other factors identified to be of importance within the literature included:

- the need to place the learner as central within online learning development (the role of tutor was found to have transformed from the role of expert to facilitator in support of this point)
- the importance of good course design
- the awareness of good pedagogy
- the need to embed reinforcement activities
- the use of multiple technologies
- the possibility of differentiation
- the promotion of collaborative learning.

Interviews with experts identified priorities for the PCDL sector with regard to the introduction of online learning. These included:

- the acceptance that change will be challenging
- a need for cost/benefit research, taking into account the cost implications relating to training a part-time workforce and the need to enhance the technical infrastructure
- the importance of tutors 'buying-into' the concept of online learning
- the emphasis upon good teaching and learning
- the development of good quality content and providing tutors with skills to author content themselves
- institutional consistency to enable the sharing of good practice and transferability of learner information.

Results of the national survey showed that 44.51% of organisations used some type of online learning provision, including provision which was not online, but made use of online materials. The review of internal data showed that online learning offered flexibility and the potential for drawing together of distributed communities. Barriers

related to technical issues, lack of time, and staff turnover and skills.

The report concluded that limited use of online learning is at present being made within the PCDL sector and that there is scope and potential for much wider use. It recommended funding for further research and staff training and development opportunities.

The potential of online assessment in non-accredited adult and community learning

This report found that online assessments can:

- have lower administrative costs
- potentially be adapted to the requirements of individual learners
- be used to ask questions in a more interactive way by allowing learners to work through scenarios and simulations
- save tutors time through automated marking and feedback.

Potential for introducing online assessments was identified at every stage of the learning process.

Guiding learners to the right course

Potential learners could be asked questions relating to the type of course they are interested in, their previous learning, level of skills and personal circumstances. Their responses could then be used to guide them to a course or choice of courses.

Initial assessment- at the beginning of a course

Initial assessment can be done through self assessment or objective testing. The key is to identify the right type of questions and ensure that their content is appropriate and relevant to the learning objectives of the course. Creating the right questions was found to be the most difficult and time-consuming aspect of introducing online assessment and the report recommended that teaching staff should be encouraged to develop their own question/activity banks and share these with other tutors.

Formative assessment- highlighting progress and need for further support during the course

Feedback is used in order to enhance learning and motivation, encourage reflection and clarify understanding. Benefits of online formative assessments include instant feedback, which can include sample answers/criteria against which the learners' answers were marked, and possible multiple attempts at questions in order to increase understanding. However, automated feedback might not provide high quality information on how to improve performance (for the learners) or shape

teaching (for the tutors). The report proposes a model with detailed recording of all learner initiated actions and tutors providing expert feedback to supplement automatic marking. This would ensure adherence to the principles of good feedback practice, as identified in the literature.

Summative assessment- at the end of a course

For accredited courses, the results of the summative assessment determine whether the learner has passed the course. In non-accredited learning, summative assessment can be used to demonstrate that learners have achieved their learning objectives. It is important to address the anxiety some learners might feel about using computers for assessment purposes, perhaps by allowing them to practise using online assessment tools. It is also appropriate to consider whether online assessment should be used alongside other approaches.

Evaluating Online Course Delivery courses

Three courses were developed as part of the Online Course Delivery project:

- Application of Online Learning (AOL): An online facilitated course, with the aim of supporting staff working in adult and community learning wishing to use online learning and online methods within their learning provision to reach new and different learners.
- Training for Trainers (TFT): A facilitated blended course exploring the principles of training and development with the aim of increasing the participants' competence as trainers and providing them with experience of training using a blended delivery method.
- The Principles of E-Learning and Widening Participation course: A self-study online course, covering how to widen participation by incorporating e-learning and online learning into delivery.

The initial delivery phase consisted of six AOL courses, one TFT course and one Principles of E-Learning and Widening Participation course. The second delivery phase consisted of three AOL courses and one TFT course. Two reports were produced to evaluate two rounds of delivery, the first in March 2007 and the second in October 2007.

Evaluation results

The *March 2007 Evaluation Report* found that participants on the AOL course considered the course to have had good quality content, good facilitators and an effective and consistent delivery, with 100% of those who completed the post-training questionnaire stating that their learning objectives had been fully or partially met. Their concerns centred around the amount of material to be covered with tight deadlines, and obtaining an general overview of the course at the beginning.

Participants on the TFT course found the face to face events to have been enjoyable and a good addition to their online learning. They praised the facilitators and found the practical aspects of the course particularly useful. They also considered the course to have had a considerable amount of content for the timescales assigned.

Participants on The Principles of E-Learning and Widening participation course were very positive about the content, rating it as high quality. However, since this was a self-study course, their responses reflected some feelings of isolation with no facilitator support available and forums set up for peer support not utilised to a great extent.

The *October 2007 Evaluation Report* found that both AOL and TFT participants considered the courses to have had high quality content with clear navigation, and good access to academic, peer and technical support. Participants' comments related to increased knowledge of and confidence with utilising online learning methods and their enjoyment of the collaborative aspects of the courses. The courses were again considered to have had a high content load and tight deadlines. The courses were found to have had low retention rates, as is often reported for online learning, with a mixture of reasons provided, relating mainly to work pressures and personal circumstances. Academic literature recommends a gentle introduction to online learning with an initial focus on activities rather than content, early establishment of group cohesion, and high levels of interactivity and encouragement. A clear statement of expectations and time commitments at the beginning of the course should also help to prepare participants for the work involved.

Impact study

A number of participants from the first round were contacted some time after the end of delivery, to find out about the impact that the courses had had on their working practices (***Impact Assessment of the Online Course Delivery Project 2006-2007***). The vast majority of past participants found the courses very relevant to their work and several stated that they were in the process of incorporating online learning within their organisations. Some of the examples given were:

- An online programme to train Information, Advice and Guidance advisors
- Online language courses in French and Spanish
- Implementation of an electronic Individual Learning Plan (eILP) system
- Development of language materials using the Hot Potatoes™ software with the plan of making them available online
- Using standard software packages to tailor activities to learners' needs and make them more interactive, thus widening participation.

The participants also stated that they had gained useful insights through participating as learners on an online course. They found the advantages of this method of learning to have been the combination of flexibility of being able to study at a time and place of their choosing, together with the collaborative aspects of the courses which offered encouragement, motivation and support.

The Online Course Delivery project was found to have answered a real need. As shown in the research reports, there is much further scope for the development of online learning within the adult and community learning.

Read the reports

The following reports are all available to download from the NIACE website.

<http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/ICT/online-courses.htm>

The potential for introducing online learning in adult and community learning provision.

The potential for online assessment in non-accredited adult and community learning.

Development of online courses with full online support pilot: Evaluation Report March 2007.

Online Course Delivery Evaluation Report October 2007.

Impact Assessment of the Online Course Delivery Project.

Reference

Hanna et al, 2000 Higher Education in an Era of Digital Competition: Choices and Challenges, Atwood Publishing, p.61

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This is the 81st 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:

56 What is online learning?

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They are also available on the website at

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NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.