

Central London ACL Consortium: integrating e-learning into adult and community education

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1. The organisations

The Central London ACL Consortium includes four institutions:

- City Lit
- Morley College
- Westminster Adult Education Service
- Working Men's College

The senior management teams of all four institutions recognised there was need to improve the learning experience by making use of the new technologies appropriate to adult education. The colleges came together to successfully bid for funding from the LSDA to run a 'transformation project' to develop the use of blended learning in the delivery of ACL courses. Each institution ran its own project, whilst working as a consortium to share resources, good practice, staff development opportunities and network.

The project was managed on two levels. The steering group's role was to provide the strategic direction for the project. The steering group was made up of one senior manager from each partner college. The steering group met at least twice per term. The second level of management was at an operational level and consisted of the project managers, whose role was to undertake the day-to-day running of the project. Each partner college had their own project manager, and all the project managers met at least once per month, with the venue rotating between the partners.

A project leader was nominated from the project managers to take responsibility for the curriculum development issues within the project and an external project co-ordinator was used to provide support on project management issues.

City Lit, which currently has approximately 900 teaching staff, mainly sessional, had six teachers working on this project, plus two mentors and the project manager. Staff from the languages department developed a blended learning approach to teaching either French or Spanish. Some classes were daytime, others evening, reflecting the differing demographic structure of these groups.

Staff from the performing arts department investigated how elements of e-learning can be incorporated into their courses, which included a drama course with embedded basic skills, a theatre technical skills course, and an acting for TV course.

Due to infrastructure restrictions in the old City Lit building, most of the elements of e-learning were additional to the classroom delivery. Where appropriate, a VLE (DigitalBrain) was used to deliver materials. Staff were encouraged to reuse existing content, rather than developing new materials from scratch e.g. NLN materials, and JISC content such as Oxford Reference Centre and Kar2ouche.

Morley College, with 450 sessionals, set up a mentors group to mentor the other staff on the project. There were 32 members of the project team and 4 mentors. All staff involved were interviewed to devise individual training programmes and a series of staff development courses have been devised for the project e.g. DigitalBrain, whiteboards, some individual instruction.

Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES) piloted the blending of e-learning into vocational community courses to assist with the embedding of language, literacy and numeracy into vocational subject areas. At WAES hourly paid lecturing staff deliver 68% of the curriculum so the main challenge facing WAES was how to communicate and disseminate e-learning initiatives to hourly paid staff. WAES piloted e-learning for various aspects of staff training and development running training 8 courses from April 2004 with an initial 30 hour course being developed and delivered by the e-learning project development officer. The course developed contained 10 hours of embedded e-learning and was developed using highly technical means. Therefore the remainder of the pilot project courses commenced in September 2004 and adopted a less technical approach to the embedding of e-learning that was achievable in relation to the technical skills of the teaching staff involved.

WAES used IT to embed e-learning in basic skills and developing a VLE. From January 2005 they developed a VLE called the E-Zone based on Moodle. There were 23 part time tutors, course team leaders and community leaders involved in the project; overall about 100 staff attended training. Everything produced was mapped to the basic skills curriculum. WAES were on target embedding e-learning and will shortly have an ALI inspection to take an external view it.

Working Men's College (WMC) was 150 years old last year and there has been a great transformation in the college's offer and student profile since then. Most learners are women and the original offer has significantly transformed - to put the College in the top 15% of adult education as demonstrated by the findings of the last ALI full Inspection.

The WMC projects are mainly in the skills for life area in the ESOL department, and visual and performing arts with associated development in ICT and languages. The project started off with 5 champions and several other staff with technological skills. Morley's notion of using mentors was quickly adopted and this became a crucial element to the project as it was all about learning and finding the best way to support teachers' use of the technology. The mentoring system helped find the right level for each individual. It also helped spread the word after the first term mentees had begun mentoring other staff and demand for e-training soared. This subsequently stretched and continues to stretch resources e.g. the network team and demand for facilities and how to use them.

The project made great early progress in the college with more demand than anticipated for e-learning mainly in the areas of SmartBoard, Quiz Software, and developmental work on a learning platform (Moodle). The college contributed to the JISC Improving literacy and numeracy for disenfranchised groups through e-learning project.

2. Overview

Initially we anticipated spending money on external trainers but our audits quickly identified that we had this key resource in our own staff. However each college had its own particular structures, flavour and needs that could have prevented successful consortium working. The 4 colleges had to work together but also had to do their own thing which they needed to measure through their own mechanisms yet be able to communicate this work to each other and the LSDA. We had a lot of convincing to do!

This brings us back to that key resource our staff. All needed to be brought together, even though they were mostly sessional, and make what we doing work for them. The way we achieved this was through networking days where staff from all colleges could come together and identify what they wanted to do and why. It wasn't particularly about giving staff a voice; it was really about us listening to the experts i.e. the teachers.

Initially the consortium was unable to reach agreement until the concept, difficulties and understandings of e-learning had been fully explored through the networking days and the experiences of the project teams.

3. Details

Approach

We realised that the types of approaches required were much more than pedagogical, technological and organisational; it was about belief and confidence in each other. This took months to achieve and much work. WMC's successful inspection gave a green light on all four counts for the project and e-learning initiatives but it also told us that each institution had to do it its own way. This made monitoring and evaluation tools difficult to establish but of crucial importance to the project. We however needed something more for participants. We had brought our staff together in our own colleges but we all needed to get together to feedback and develop ideas. Networking days managed to help us achieve this by working together. It also helped us check and evaluate progress across the institutions on a face-to-face basis.

The aim was to keep the evaluation processes simple and manageable but to provide good quality evidence on which to base judgements. The action plan, staff audit questionnaire, monthly reporting, expenditure monitoring, and evaluation tools were used across all the colleges and this was always a challenge but crucial to the success of the project and the measuring of that success against institutional, consortium and LSDA targets.

Scale

60% of staff had some form of training and the amount of learners receiving e-learning went from 20% to close on 60%. The numbers involved though in some cases were fairly similar averaging out at about 100 per institution and several thousand students. The scale of project can be seen by the amount of time it demanded from the management teams of the four colleges through the steering group that met seven times over the year, plus members' attendance at all networking days

Impact

Learners, all staff, and partners were quite clear about the benefits:

- Networking days were rated 90% good or better overall.
- All were not only clear that e-learning made lessons more enjoyable for learners and teachers but also provided better learning opportunities.
- More interactive learning equals better engagement.
- Learners were positive about the benefits of e-learning.
- College data supported improvements in attendance and retention.
- Better success rates.
- College partners were involved and were 100% positive in their feedback.

Each organisation was able to demonstrate transformation of a higher or lesser degree. One has stated it has achieved all it wants to for the moment and needs to focus its attention elsewhere due to other government initiatives in AE. Others such as City Lit and WMC are continuing the development. E-learning has become part of schemes of work, lesson planning, lesson observations, even impacting on everyday college life with developments with the intranet, e.g. City Lit with Share Point. Since our dissemination event (held at City Lit) we are talking more with other ACLs (e.g. Redbridge and Hillcroft) to make stronger links and pool experience and information.

Costs and benefits

The increase in use of open source software was very marked in that two colleges established a Moodle VLE and the new challenge is to continue to broaden out its use across each college. The real benefit would appear in the vast growth of capacity to share a range of resources across individual organisations and the consortium. This was one of the clear aims of the steering committee and perhaps it also has gone some way to break down the silo mentalities of college departments. The project demanded high amounts of match funding and certainly stretched budgets and continues to do so in some of the colleges but about a third of project resources were used to simply run it as a consortium but much valuable experience was gained from this.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

The purpose and expectation for the consortium should be agreed and understood by all partners at the initial stages.

- Strong project managers with a good understanding of the models of project processes, such as action planning and evaluation, are essential.
- The commitment of senior managers to the project, through the steering group, is essential to ensure the consortium moves forward.
- A continuing difficulty had been how to share information between four different kinds of colleges, given how hard it already is to share within one institution.
- The processes and methods of consortium working should be planned in advance.
- Specific methods of consortium monitoring and evaluation do not always fit into different partner structures and cultures and this can create tensions between partners.
- Consortium problems can detract from the individual project work.
- The amount of time needed to set up the appropriate reporting structures should be built into the process and should not be underestimated.
- Finding a facility where consortium project teams can meet and work is difficult.
- Different levels of technology and different systems can hinder the sharing of good practice and materials.
- Measuring transformation through e-learning over a short period of time is difficult.
- An open invitation to all staff to join the project team works well.

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