

The College of West Anglia: facilitating the production of professional development journals (PDJ) and the development of reflective practice through blended e-learning

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This handout is one of a series of 20 from the ALT/LSDA "E-learning making it work conference" held in London on 13 October 2005. Other handouts in the series, as well as a compilation of all of them, can be accessed in PDF format from http://www.alt.ac.uk/fe_practitioner_conference.html

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1. The organisation

The College of West Anglia is one of the largest and most successful further education and training providers in the Eastern Region. It is based on three campuses, King's Lynn in Norfolk, and Milton and Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. There are also learning centres in Downham Market, Hunstanton, Sheringham, Fakenham and Thetford. Each year more than 20,000 students are enrolled on courses ranging from 3 hour taster sessions in IT through to full-time degrees.

2. Overview

The aim of the project (one of LSDA's related transformation projects) was to develop and introduce blended e-learning into initial teacher training (ITT) through the professional development process in order to extend, enhance and embed reflective practice for learners. It aimed to deliver positive outputs and outcomes of a tangible and intangible nature. Tangible outputs focused on the development of 'on-line' systems and formal protocols to facilitate reflective professional development. Less tangible outcomes focused on the developing confidence, competence and commitment to the use of e-learning with the ITT group. It was hoped that this would increase the learner's confidence to use e-learning in their own teaching practice. (cf the LLUK e-learning standards Q1,2,3.)

Objectives included to:

- plan and launch the ITT e-learning professional development project.
- design a robust on-line system to facilitate professional development.
- utilise the on-line professional system with the ITT cohort.
- measure the performance of the on-line professional development system.
- evaluate the performance of the on-line professional development system.
- quantify and qualify relevant learning and development in the project team.

3. Details

Approach

The research project was designed around an established group of 47 learners engaged in the second part of an ITT City and Guilds 7407 qualification. The group comprised 2 distinct cohorts, one delivered at COWA, the other delivered off site at a local RAF station. The college course was intended for public access, whereas the RAF course was intended for service personnel only. Both cohorts were taught by the same staff and followed the same syllabus, being assessed against the same unit criteria.

The professional development journal (PDJ) which is required of students related to the following City and Guilds 7407 units:

- U107: Self-evaluation. *Aims: To evaluate one's own practice within a professional value base and to agree codes of professional practice and to evaluate personal skills against those required for teaching.* The focus of U107 is on 'reflective practice' as defined in the FENTO (now LLUK) standards via a traditional paper-based professional development journal (PDJ), during the first semester (September 2004 to January 2005).
- U118: Personal development. *Aims: To work within a professional value base and to conform to agreed codes of professional practice.* The focus of U118 is on continuing professional development (CPD). The COWA ITT e-learning project was built around this unit, with the PDJ being in electronic form in a virtual learning environment (VLE). Feedback and assessment from the tutor to the student were held on-line in a form that replaced the traditional paper-based journal. Each student cohort was introduced to the VLE system in semester 2 and continued to use it up to the end of the course in June 2005. This new form of PDJ was agreed with the City and Guilds 7407 external verifier, who viewed some of the entries in June and was pleased with the outcome.

Scale

A critical success factor was the decision from the beginning to use the lowest level of technology, which would do the job with a minimum of development work and a maximum use of common tools. Previous experience had shown that e-mail messaging, a familiar concept to many people, can be used to support on-line discussion. The project used a proprietary VLE (WebCT) to host the PDJ for each learner, with all records held securely on the college's central computer. Learners accessed and interacted with the system via a web-browser (e.g. Internet Explorer) and made all entries direct into WebCT. The advantages of this include data integrity and security whilst no additional software is required for access. Training needs for both tutor and learner (see below) were reduced by the common familiarity of web-browser and e-mail protocols.

Once logged onto WebCT the learners could also access resources related to the course. These included the course timetable, which had links to session information and support material (PowerPoint presentations given by the tutors, handouts, unit information) and the course handbook, which contained all the City and Guilds guidelines and appeal procedures. There was also the facility for learners to e-mail each other within the group and for the tutor to send e-mails to the whole cohort on pre-set dates if required.

Impact

The process of reflective practice in teacher training should involve continual improvement. By recording thoughts and reactions to events and situations in a PDJ, learners can help to develop knowledge and understanding to improve their teaching. A paper-based PDJ can become a very subjective account and may turn into a 'dear diary' where the learner is diverted away from reflection. As the course tutor commented, the paper based PDJ was checked only twice a term by the tutors and therefore the student could have been unreflective and going in the wrong direction for a whole six weeks before this could be pointed out. The online PDJ alleviated this problem by providing more immediate feedback.

Costs and benefits

The issue of 'what is reflection' is an on-going one. With the on-line PDJ, guidance could be given regularly and pedagogic issues could be reinforced through informative feedback and setting small targets in the tutor's responses. Another benefit is the immediacy of the on-line PDJ and tutors can respond to a current need, the responses relating to one another.

4. Lessons, caveats and implications

A critical success factor was the involvement of the senior management team from the beginning of the project. Their attendance at the monthly review meetings ensured the smooth running of the project and the senior management team's in-depth understanding of and involvement in the project as it developed.

The project has been very successful in meeting its key objectives. The on-line system has proved itself to be secure, robust and simple to use. The majority of the learners interviewed found the system far more convenient and effective than the paper-based version and that tutor responses were more rapid and therefore often more relevant. Both tutors involved in the project were also very positive, feeling that the system was an efficient use of their time and responses improved the relationship that they had with learners. The proof of the project's viability is the fact that it will continue to be used in the next academic year and developed further for other FE and HE courses running at the College of West Anglia.

5. Contact details

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