

Lancashire Learning Partnership: e-learning transformation – making it happen

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1. The organisations

Over the past year, a network of 12 Lancashire post-16 educational institutions has collaborated to identify what it feels are the key models and processes for embedding e-learning, and the impact of the widespread use, and innovative features of, technology on learners.

2. Overview

The network partners have used their collective skills and experience to develop transferable models of practice in the use of e-learning. These include the way in which we:

- Define an essential skills set for the use of e-learning, and how this can be measured amongst staff.
- Design and run professional development programmes to meet any significant skills gaps.
- Support innovation in the use of technology for teaching and learning through action-based projects.
- Identify the key processes to support sustainable e-learning infrastructures, particularly in an environment where increasing demands on capacity are met with only a modest increase in resources

3. Details

Approach

We used a variety of approaches to address each strand.

For the essential e-learning skills set we first needed to agree what is meant by essential e-learning skills as a clear taxonomy did not seem to exist nationally. A working party of 6 ILT managers was formed to create a skill set and complete a survey form that could be used across our partner institutions. The final survey form was a hybrid with sufficient scope to satisfy the needs of all members. The group felt the resulting proforma was an improvement as it focused on several key factors, each of which influenced the other in terms of institutional e-learning skills provision:

- Software/hardware application skills.
- Use of these skills in a teaching and learning context.
- Ability to apply skills and knowledge (i.e. access to resources).

The ILT managers working group met again in early June 2004 to consider how the results from the skills survey could be used to design a new professional development programme, which could offer just-in-time training in the skill gaps that had been identified. Development time for teachers was also a factor, and the programme design made much use of specific skill sessions that could be completed in one hour or less.

Through the use of action-based projects, the group aimed to measure the impact of e-learning on student engagement, retention and achievement. The main measure was the engagement of students in the evaluation of their perceptions of their own performance with regard to the technology used, as well as staff perceptions.

Twenty two projects were completed within eleven partner institutions between June 2004 and February 2005. The projects were divided into three broad contexts which correspond to the Becta e-learning fan (*Managing Inspection and ILT, Becta, 2002*): supporting learners, supporting traditional learning, and anytime/ remote-learning

A case study approach was used to investigate sustainable e-learning strategies. IT managers in six partner colleges were interviewed and asked how sustainable e-learning was managed in practice. The managers represented small, medium and large institutions so a wide variation in provision was taken into account. All of the case studies were based on three broad areas of support – infrastructure planning, standards of service, and the way in which IT services connect with teaching and learning.

Scale

Over three hundred (334) teachers across six institutions took part in the essential skills survey.

A new training programme called ILT4Teachers was based on the skill gaps identified from the survey and the programme was piloted across three institutions.

Twenty two action-based projects were completed across 11 institutions. 450 learners fed back on their perceptions of how e-learning had enhanced their learning. 39 teachers in total fed back on how they felt e-learning had added value to learner engagement, retention and achievement.

Six IT managers had explained their approaches to sustainable e-learning.

Impact

The feedback from 450 learners indicated that e-learning adds most value to their learning in 8 ways:

- Use of images, animation, video and sound to stimulate sensory engagement.
- Use of resources that add spontaneity and relevance.
- Use of a diversity of sensory forms to maintain attention and to recognise different learning styles.
- Use of features to make lessons more memorable.
- Enabling students to visualise ideas more easily and within their own time frames.
- Providing an alternative explanation to that provided by the teacher.
- Offering numerous examples to help understand the theory.
- Using ILT resources to enable students to be, and to feel, better organised.

The feedback from the 39 teachers involved in the action-based projects indicated that through e-learning students are better able to:

- Recall subject content.
- Gain confidence in their abilities through accelerated knowledge and skills acquisition and instant feedback on progress (particularly through learning construct software and online/onscreen tests).

- Contribute to discussion and development of ideas (e.g. through forums and chat rooms).
- Improve their work in terms of presentation and increased use of a variety of sources.

A third (33%) of respondents felt that retention or attendance had been enhanced through e-learning. Three quarters (75%) of respondents felt that e-learning had had a positive impact on achievement.

The essential skills survey of 334 teachers showed overall that teachers lacked confidence in 60% of the essential e-learning skills listed. There were particularly low levels of confidence in the skills that learners most value (e.g. use of multi media to stimulate sensory engagement).

Of the sustainable e-learning strand, it was noted that:

- IT managers could not recognise an external benchmark for post-16 IT services so there was a wide variation in type and levels of technical support.
- IT managers often inherit a fragmented network that does not connect between institutional software in terms of exchanging and updating information, and means that some parts of an institution have better network access than others. This was often as a result of network investment being affected by annual budget cycles rather than a long-term strategy. This can lead to an inconsistent experience for learners.
- IT managers tend not to be included in curriculum planning activities so e-learning demands tend to be unexpected, urgent and lead to temporary solutions which then impacts on the fragmented network.

From the teachers who took part in the essential skills survey and the case study outcomes from the IT managers, we conclude that institutions are only able to utilise fully a maximum of 40% of their existing e-learning potential.

- Lack of e-learning skills in teachers and differing levels of network service means that students are having different levels of e-learning experiences.
- ICT-based qualifications are not a comprehensive institutional answer to updating e-learning skills in staff; resources should be focused on supporting essential skill gaps if greater impact is desired

Costs and benefits

There has already been much investment in e-learning infrastructure over the past five years in the institutions studied; the main benefits have yet to be realised because, in some cases, the wrong emphasis is being placed on e-learning development. Institutions can get better value for money if they use the existing assets more intensively in terms of fair distribution of e-learning resources across the institution and developing skills in staff who make better/more imaginative use of existing networked software.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

The move of any organisation from the transformative to revolutionary use of e-learning is influenced by three main factors. Firstly, teachers need to be updated in the essential e-learning skills that are needed to stimulate innovative practice inside and outside of the classroom. Secondly, all staff need to understand where e-learning adds value to the curriculum and how it can be used effectively to support learning, support traditional learning, and to support anytime/remote-learning. Finally, the technical infrastructure must be flexible, scalable, fast, utterly reliable, and focused on the needs of the learner.

There is a specific set of skills with which all teachers should feel confident if revolutionary use of e-learning is to happen. Teachers report that the ability to capture, edit, cut and paste learning resources and then link them to other resources tend to be seen as the most useful skills. The most popular techniques for building resources included the interactive features of Microsoft Office and Internet image and media clip search and capture.

There are large differences in skill levels between existing teachers, and a need for responsive and flexible staff development programmes that are based on the essential e-learning skills. It is not certain that external awards can meet this need in every case. There is also a need to develop programmes for teachers that build confidence at an elementary technical level.

In a revolutionary e-learning organisation, the features that students identify as being of most help in their learning should form the content of a staff development programme.

Action-based projects are a clear and measurable way of introducing e-learning innovation into the curriculum, but teachers must involve other areas of the institution that have a stake in its success from the outset (e.g. IT services). Objectives need to have an action, a standard and a condition in order to be measurable. The time allocated for a project, the training effort and allowance for the introduction of new technology are consistently under-estimated.

Classroom management is as important as the appropriate use of technology in terms of achieving a high quality learning experience. Observations showed that the arrangement of a classroom, the timing of the lesson, involvement of the learner and the ability to move fluently from one medium to another were particularly important.

Each of the strands we have explored has raised specific opportunities and priorities for making e-learning more effective within any institution. The sheer scale and range of issues can seem daunting however, and it is vital that leaders focus on a few priorities at a time, and achieve a high quality result.

An annual e-learning skills survey is one of the most influential, single activities you can undertake to pave the way for transformational change, as it has implications for staff development, access to hardware and software, and the extent to which the IT infrastructure supports the curriculum (or otherwise).

Equipping teachers with essential e-learning skills is another area to which it is worth allocating resources. Once teachers are e-confident they can alter their curriculum to use e-learning where it truly adds value, create imaginative materials for particular learners and groups, and make better use of existing resources at a local level.

A very small outlay on resources can yield far reaching results. For instance, the inclusion of IT managers in high-level curriculum planning activity will begin the process of challenging IT managers to allow teachers better rights of access, while at the same time protecting network security and business continuity. It will also promote discussion on the nature of network services to teachers, and the way in which just-in-time technical support can be made available.

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