London Online: an innovative approach to training for online interactive materials production

Supported by:

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1. The organisation

London Online is a growing strategic partnership initiated in 2001 in response to a vision that all London learners should have access to relevant, high-quality e-learning resources. It is steered by partners and directed/led by Chris Avis at Southwark College.

2. Overview

The project involved and combined training and professional development of staff in FE and ACL with effective collaboration and high quality interactive materials development. The materials including the source files are released free to the sector, and there has been extremely positive feedback both regionally and nationally.

The achievements include: true collaboration between members of Central London Learning Partnership and Tower Hamlets College who developed the programme, including five colleges, one special designated institute, one skills for life professional development centre, and one community training organisation. The materials have been formally piloted with a further nine ACL providers. 24 trainees have been recruited and trained between Sept 03 to July 05

The project has resulted in two sets of freely available interactive materials, comprising eleven ESOL units mapped to the national skills for life curriculum. The materials comprise customisable learning objects together with an easy to use authoring tool - picturegrid editor.

There has been a groundswell of interest and positive feedback nationally from tutors accessing and using the materials and authoring tool. The 03-04 materials were created to complement the DfES Read, Write, Plus materials and mapped to the national skills for life curriculum at Entry Level 1. The units include the topics Friends, Health, Jobs, Neighbourhood and Shopping.

The 04-05 materials were created to complement the ESOL and Citizenship curriculum at various levels. The units include the topics Renting Accommodation, Settling in to a New Home, Neighbours, Transport, College Life and Free Time.

3. Details

Approach

Invitations were sent to Central London colleges and ACL providers as well as various contact lists inviting expressions of interest in the course/project from ESOL teachers or multi-media developers.

Trainees attended ten three-hour sessions and worked in pairs and as a team in the intervening (30hrs) development sessions. The training workshop at Tower Hamlets College was made available for the duration of the project.

This 20-week schedule included an induction session at the beginning and a dissemination workshop at the end to which line managers, project steering group and external guests were invited.

All trainees accessed a WebCT course and used a JISCMail mailing list to communicate and share materials and ideas throughout the duration of the course/project.

All the pairs completed module grids and storyboarding to develop the content of their chosen modules which reflected the ESOL Read Write Plus (03-04) and Citizenship (04-05) topics and map onto the chosen level of the core curriculum.

Course sessions involved a mix of whole group, split group, pair work and tutorials as well as individual on-line and off-line support.

A major objective was to produce materials which are easy to customise without specialist skills e.g. keeping all assets external and therefore easy to replace. This has also enabled the easy and efficient creation of new content during 04-05.

The original authoring files (Macromedia Flash) are also made freely available to enable and encourage further and additional development. Where possible all coding is fully commented.

An easy to use authoring tool (picturegrid editor) was developed and made available as further 'proof of concept' of the value of using external assets.

Scale

There were approximately twelve participants each year (03-04 & 04-05) all of whom are staff from London colleges and ACL providers. There were also three trainers (one a previous participant) and numerous steering group members and partners.

Dissemination has involved CLLP, talent London, LLU+, Becta, LSDA, JISC RSC, NIACE, TechDis and a range of other organisations and individuals. This has included events, training workshops, case studies and various email and online communications.

There have been over 1200 downloads of the 03-04 materials and picturegrid editor and large numbers of registrations of interest together with positive feedback via the available online form.

Impact

The project participants have produced high quality, interactive and engaging learning material mapped to the skills for life curriculum. There has been a successful pilot/evaluation with 100+ learners in London and very positive feedback from tutors and trainers nationally who have used the material with their own learners.

All the participants are motivated to develop materials further and disseminate project outputs. Some have been delivering external workshops as well as disseminating within their own organisations.

Staff in a number of colleges and ACL providers have used the customisable engine-based material to repurpose and create new material. For some colleges this has formed the basis of an LSDA Q Project.

Line managers of course participants have been involved and very supportive throughout the project. In many cases further development has been ongoing and involvement in the project has encouraged and initiated further CPD and materials development activities.

Training the trainers workshops have been delivered enabling further cascading of use and customization of the materials and awareness and recognition of the benefits of collaborative development.

Costs and benefits

The project has been funded (£25k/year) by the Central London Learning Partnership (CLLP) which, itself, is funded through LSC London Central. In year 04-05 the project was supported from the LSC's discretionary Local Initiative Development Funds (LIDF).

The trainees and trainers were paid for their involvement via their institutions, although in most cases the time and effort involved far exceeded the requisite learning and development hours.

The project has recently secured a small amount (£2k) from NIACE's Content for Adult and Community Learning (CACL) funds to provide London Online training workshops. These will be delivered in December/January at the Mary Ward Centre in Camden. The Mary Ward Centre is one of the ACL partners in the project and a member of CLLP.

At the moment funding is being sought but is not currently available for running the course/project during 05-06.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

The development of easy to use and customisable engine-based material facilitates much wider usage and ongoing development.

The collaborative development methodology has provided a strong model for developing and mapping materials to a curriculum and has encouraged and enabled participants to identify effective practice in adding value to traditional resources and delivery.

This training/project/collaborative development model established through London Online is transferable to other subject areas.

Like all projects individual and team communication and responsibilities are crucial to success. Use of a JISCMail list has proved an important and essential part of this project.

Steering group and line manager involvement/support is another crucial element.

A well equipped training and development environment together with availability of specialised resources and support was also a key factor.

5. Contact details

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03-04 materials: www.talent.ac.uk/londononline
04-05 materials: www.talent.ac.uk/londononline/0405
Picturegrid Editor: http://www.tower.ac.uk/curweb/ILT/resourcesdetail.asp?DocID=2148
Downloads and updates: www.tower.ac.uk/curweb/londononline