

South East Essex College: seeNet - a college intranet

Supported by:



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

South East Essex College is a large general further education college with growing higher education provision located in Southend. In 2004 the college moved to a new £52 million building in the centre of the town. The college has an excellent IT infrastructure and has a balance of open learning areas and seminar rooms.

2. Overview

seeNet is the college intranet, developed in-house.

Most significantly seeNet is embedded in college practice and culture to the point that it is the message rather than the medium that is the focus of attention for users. seeNet is not the focus of our teaching and learning strategy; it is just one tool among many available to staff and students.

3. Details

Approach

It should be obvious to everyone that ICT can change the way we work and learn for the better - - everyone says so (including the DfES), so it must be true. So why aren't people falling over themselves to embrace the technology? Either they are lazy and stupid *or* they don't believe that it will make their lives better. Sometimes they are absolutely right! Making ICT work means making people work differently and people resist change.

Scale

seeNet consists of 5 million unique pages, 40,000 lesson plans, hundreds of thousands of learning resources and receives 120,000 page requests each day from 2000 unique staff and students users. seeNet is the primary means of communication in the college for staff and students and can be accessed as an extranet.

Impact

There are 3 barriers to embedding the use of a technology:

Access

Time

Motivation

It must be unrealistic for someone to say 'I couldn't get on to a computer'. If the online systems are the primary means of communication then it must be realistic to expect people to log on at least once a day. There must be: continuity of experience (all machines must perform the same tasks), lots and lots of computers including laptops for staff and wireless networking, possibly external access and mobile device connectivity.

Staff say 'I enjoyed the training session and it's a good idea but I haven't got time to do it'. Telling people IT will save them time is counter-productive: they won't believe you and it's probably not true. Is it sustainable to give people extra time to do something you want to embed? Do champions restrict embedding ILT? Sell the benefits not the features (if there aren't real benefits, why are you doing it?). Early adopters are great advocates (preferably not the techies). But .t may take a year or two to demonstrate the efficiencies of a system.

Usability is the single-most important factor in embedding a system – training should not be necessary. 'When people sit around a table and discuss what they might like to see on a site, they will often focus on superficial aspects and praise fancy features like animation and Flash effects. But if these same users were ever asked to actually use the site to accomplish a task, they would usually ignore the animations and would find that the Flash effects hurt them more than it helped them.'

[Jakob Nielsen, Alertbox, December 12, 1999]

The rules for usability include keeping it simple and following conventions. Thus:

- Blue links
- No drop-down menus
- Resist the urge to animate
- No frames
- Use a good search engine
- People have already got the skills to use the Internet for banking, buying and information finding - use the same skills
- The hardware must work as well - all the time
- Beware the assumptions of software developers
- Just because a feature exists it doesn't mean you have to use it
- It should work first time and every time
- There should be no need for explanation or training - point, click and type
- It's never the user's fault for being stupid or not reading the instructions
- Be consistent in interfaces and language - if possible, across systems
- It must be easier to do things on-line than off-line
- Most tasks people are asked to perform using ICT they are already doing off-line
- Work out what users use your systems for the most and make it easy for them
- Count the clicks it takes to perform every task

In relation to staff motivation:

- 20/60/20 - ignore the bottom 20%
- Find an unambiguous benefit and talk it up (i.e. cover!!!!)
- Catch new staff early
- Managers are critical if staff are to join in
- The path of least resistance - if it works it should sell itself

Costs and benefits

In relation to management and strategy:

- It's not a magic solution to anything
- The power of "e":
 - Gets funding.
 - Gets projects the green light.
 - Gets attention.
 - Gets unreasonable expectations in very short time-scales.

Ask about the cost/benefit:

- Is it going ahead just because it's an ICT project?
- Is it a good idea but not worth the effort?

4. Lessons, caveats and implications

Senior management:

- Must be risk-taking not risk-averse.
- May require an enforced need to change.
- Committed to use of ICT - no half measures (but beware the power of 'e').
- Accept it's a long term project.
- Mustn't be seduced by software - pedagogy before technology.
- Must accept failure.
- Must accept lack of measurable outcomes.
- Must praise successes.
- Must accept it's not all about e-learning. It's about doing what you already do more effectively and giving the opportunity to do some new things.

And finally, more impact can be made on the success of a course by making all the existing handouts and assessments available on-line than by creating a multimedia extravaganza that is used in one or two sessions (and at a fraction of the cost). It's not sexy-technology and it doesn't look great at conferences, but it is easy to do and has real practical benefits for staff and students.

5. Contact details

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