South Birmingham College: a teacher training gateway

Supported by:

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1. The organisation

South Birmingham College has over 30,000 enrolments each year and has 5 major sites across the city and numerous community venues. We offer specialist provision in the broadest range of professional, vocational and academic qualifications.

A very large proportion of our courses, well over 50%, are delivered in a community context. This includes much of our teacher training provision. To support this provision, through access to our learning resources, we are establishing a number of broadband network connections at community venues that will have secure access to our on-line teacher training subject gateway and our VLE. It is anticipated that this pilot programme would be deployed more widely across the community provision in the academic year 2005-06. Ours is a rich multi-cultural, multi-racial college, with our student body coming from all walks of life.

2. Overview

The aim of our project is to develop an on-line resource for initial teacher training at South Birmingham College, comprising teacher training support material and e-learning content within a VLE. The nominated VLE is MOODLE, an open source solution freely available to the sector. Obviously this is subject to continuous scrutiny, enhancements and refinement by its user community. It will be used to support integrating e-learning pedagogy in initial teacher training and to develop trainer and trainee skills in relation to e-learning

3. Details

Approach

The College recognises the need for a fast track bridging programme to assist trainee teachers to progress from 7302 to 7407 qualifications and is developing a separate bid for funding to develop this. It is anticipated that distance learning and our approach to developing a teacher training e-learning resource will be key to this development.

The production of a teacher training gateway as a sustainable and easily manageable on-line resource and VLE, focusing directly on teacher training, is likely to be of general value across the sector. South Birmingham College plans to implement this for its own teacher trainers and trainees and we anticipate it would have widespread application.

It focuses on teacher training and enabling trainees to experience ILT as part of their own learning and leads them to consider how they could use ILT in their teaching.

The development of tools, based on readily available platforms, to assist teacher trainers and trainees in making wider use of ILT within teaching and learning is, we believe, a significant step towards this.

We have a highly qualified content development team in place to carry out technical aspects of the project. They have considerable experience of integrating e-learning pedagogy and e-learning content development. The team has been involved in a range of sector wide projects in e-learning including the X4L (Exchange for Learning), Phase 1 and have recently won a bid to take part in Phase 2.

Scale

For the pilot we used two groups consisting of 30 learners. One group was based at the college; the other group was based at a Gurdwara, a place of worship for Sikhs.

Impact

We found that learners welcomed the opportunity to use the learning objects. They had in some cases already covered the modules to which the objects related. This gave them the advantage of having a different mode of delivery with which to compare them. The things our learners said were most valuable to them included being able to work at own pace, check their learning by using the quizzes, having access to the learning objects any time, and reviewing possible opportunities to use ILT within their own subject areas.

Practitioners found them useful to underpin knowledge and to introduce topics. They were also encouraged by the learners' response to investigate other areas within the syllabus that would benefit the learner by being developed into learning objects.

Staff who had recently completed teacher training and more experienced staff found them useful as refreshers and also encouraged them to search out areas within their own curriculum area that would benefit from this type of development.

It means that we are moving forward with the agenda to embed ILT into the curriculum; we will continue to build on this success in teacher training and the wider curriculum. Having the materials on-line means more of our staff and learners are able to access them as and when they need them without being in a formal setting.

Costs and benefits

The biggest cost was staff development and funding the different stages of the learning objects development, including teacher time. We already had the hardware and a team with developer skills available in-house.

Another benefit was that students appeared more engaged in their learning which we believe was enhanced by the use of these bespoke learning objects.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications...

We found that once we had exposed staff to the possibilities and benefits of these learning objects it raised their awareness to possible developments in their own curriculum areas. We have now started to work with some of the staff on some of these developments.

Our advice to others would include taking note of issues such as copyright. Materials being used in college by teaching staff were the starting point for the development of the learning objects. It soon became apparent that we would infringe copyright law if we used them as part of the project and disseminated them to the wider community. Permission was sought for the use of some materials and others have not been used as permission was not given. We have learnt to become 'creative' in drawing upon existing materials, using the ideas they contain but creating our own customised versions.

In common perhaps with other projects lack of time has been an issue. There never seems to be enough time to talk, meet together, plan, develop and test the growing range of learning objects.

We sought to allocate time for teaching staff to take an active part in the project but even where this was possible, we found that being spread over five sites and community venues meant that sometimes it could be problematic trying to get us all together. We recommend to others following our path that they allow adequate time to complete even the simplest of tasks.

We had a dedicated team experienced in the development of e-learning materials and their very existence has been fundamental to the success of our project. Every project involved in the development of e-learning materials is different and has it own issues to resolve; this initial teacher training project was no exception.

5. Contact details

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