Workers' Educational Association (WEA): Community Grid for Learning and the WEA

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. About our organisations

The Community Grid for Learning (CGfL) is a programme set up within the Workers' Educational Association. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is the UK's largest voluntary provider of adult education. Founded in 1903 to support the educational needs of working men and women, the WEA has maintained its commitment to provide access to education and learning for adults from all backgrounds, and in particular those who have previously missed out on education.

The WEA is a 21st Century, democratic, voluntary adult education movement, committed to widening participation and to enabling people to realise their full potential through learning. The CGfL was set up as a partnership project in Greater Manchester and has involved a wide range of statutory and voluntary bodies, working together to develop and deliver online learning content. This strong emphasis on content development is born out of a fundamental belief that what most people want from eLearning is good content that is relevant to them immediately. Partners include libraries, community and disability organisations, black and minority ethnic groups, family centres, social service bodies, regeneration agencies, adult education services and UK Online centres.

2. Overview of what we have achieved

The Greater Manchester Community Grid for Learning has its origins a decade ago when the WEA set up its first broadband multimedia computing centre with a 10Mb JANET link to Manchester Computing and was using laptops to run *ICT in the Community* courses with socially excluded groups in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the northwest. We learnt a key lesson from our students. They wanted relevant content that was not intimidating and over complex and we decided to seek the resources to achieve this.

Launched in 2003 with a team of six e-learning and networking specialists, CGfL has established an online portal – www.learners.org.uk – which offers free, 24-hour-a-day access to high quality and compelling interactive courses. Written and presented in clear and straightforward styles, the courses are attractive to adults with less confidence in their learning abilities. The material is used widely within the WEA and by others both online and in different blended learning contexts.

Our emphasis is on collaboration and aggregation of effort. After a successful 30 month 'proof of concept' period we have found that by working with partners we can grow the market, capitalise on existing NLN and other assets and expand opportunities for disadvantaged learners. We can also secure more effective use of digital resources and provide high quality CPD and training in the use of ILT for people working in ACL, in libraries and in the voluntary and community sector. We are in the process of seeking public and private sector partnerships to achieve a sustainable future for this work from 2006.

3. The details of our CGFL Project

Approach

Pedagogic - To be successful e-learning must motivate and arouse the curiosity of learners. This is a tougher task when working with less confident learners than it is with postgraduates seeking updating and extension of an existing knowledge base. A unique feature of our online courses is that they are created by our team in partnership with tutors, community professionals, librarians, volunteers and learners. The production and delivery of our courses are guided by 4 principles: listen, reflect, create, and engage that we believe can be applied to a range of learning design contexts. We 'listen' very carefully to our prospective clients to ascertain what it is they want to learn. Then we 'reflect' upon the extent to which these needs are part of a wider national or regional agenda and 'create' high quality, interactive content and finally we 'engage' closely with the community to ensure effective delivery.

We have produced materials in house, in conjunction with external e-learning designers and specialist SMEs and via the repurposing of digital assets created by the NLN and others like Tower Hamlets College who have been working with London Online. We seek feedback from partners and tutors and from learners via questionnaires so that we can improve accessibility and design.

There is an emphasis on interactive fun material, which encourages learners to progress to other learning. Most of the courses are in short modular form and can be undertaken in anywhere between 15 minutes and two hours. At present none are accredited, although as we extend the tracking functionality on the site, we will be exploring this option with partners.

A number of the courses have a strong *Skills for Life* orientation and are used by WEA tutors in conjunction with traditional face to face courses and with Employer Training Pilot (ETP) courses. Here the use of wireless laptops & CGfL modules has enabled the learners to improve their ICT skills and successfully complete online their National Literacy Tests at level 1 and 2.

Courses have been designed for the *learners* website in a variety of formats to suit different learning and teaching styles. As a result the team has become proficient in using a range of course authoring tools including *Flash*, *Dreamweaver*, S*eminar*, Q*uandary* and W*ebquests*; for e-tutor supported distance learning, like our Gardening Online course we have trialled virtual learning environments and learning management systems such as C*laroline*, *Fronter* and *Moodle*.

Organisational - The development of online learning as an integral part of an ACL provider's service has many implications in terms of organisation, administration and staff development. The primary focus of the CGfL team has had to be on the creation and delivery of specific courses to meet agreed funding targets, but in general this work can only be sustained if the WEA and its partner organisations become e-enabled and are able to make full use of the potential of ILT.

This has meant looking at all aspects of our management, administrative and curriculum infrastructure; and to do this we have drawn upon the experience which the CGfL team has built up in devising e-learning solutions for adult community learning. We have also needed to provide support for staff in libraries and centres as they help to support learners accessing CGfL courses.

Online course modules have been produced using Moodle to support the roll out of a National WEA 7407 C&G Tutor Training programme; support has been given to staff undertaking e-Guides training and a new WEA NW website has been created which offers information to students and volunteers and enables tutors to download lots of materials and documentation to support their work. We are aiming for the WEA to become the 'Cisco' of the ACL sector, where many activities can be dealt with online instead of using traditional communication methods. We recognise however that this will take time!

Technical - All of the CGfL materials on www.learners.org.uk are hosted on our own firewall protected servers, located at the WEA offices in Manchester. These are connected by a 10Mb link to the JANET system via Manchester Computing at the University of Manchester, which has been throughout an important partner in the project. The system operates with a high level of redundancy.

We believe that we have substantial capacity for scaling up the operation as we attract new learners, but have not had the chance to test this fully yet. Where possible we have preferred to use open source solutions and meet relevant standards for content creation to facilitate repurposing of materials.

Scale

- Over 24,000 unique visitors have logged onto the www.learners.org.uk website since January 2004
- Over 1000 people have registered for courses
- 36 separate online interactive courses and activities are available free for users
- Two pilot Own Label CGfL sites have been created for Library authorities, using our material
- CGfL materials are being accessed from over 50 different locations to our knowledge
- Principal bodies involved are libraries, UK Online & community centres, ACL & VCS bodies
- 32 jobs have been created as a result of the programme
- Support has been given to four ETP programmes funded by LSC
- 120 staff have been trained in e-learning issues
- Advice and support has been given for 19 community based capacity building ICT initiatives

The impact of the CGfL Project

… on learners, teachers, partners, staff, etc

The project has had a substantial impact on the way that tutors have been developing their work and supporting their students. Three comments below illustrate attitudes:

- "These resources can be used as an additional teaching tool. They have helped learners to understand basic IT. The Memory game and shopping course help beginners to use a mouse. Learners really enjoyed them". **Diane Palliser, ESOL tutor**

- "The online resources are clear and easy to understand which makes it easier for the students to comprehend how to use the internet. This is a centralised resource, which the students can access from their home computers too". **Richard Jackson, IT tutor**

- "Everything is professional and yet friendly, relaxed and highly conducive for learning. Although the practical assignments take up time. They are a vital part of reinforcing what I've been learning. One great thing about this course has been the many varied formats used to get the information across". **Debbie Glanville, Gardening Online Learner**

- "I was amazed at how effective the techniques were in helping to manage my daughter's tantrums… It made me feel more confident". **Parents doing Parent Survival course**

… on the organisations involved

The impact on the WEA in the NW and nationally has been significant (See 3.1 above). The partner organisations have been able to access materials and play a substantial role in developing new materials for use with their clients, as indicated below:

- "Other overseas nurses are coming to me to ask if they can do the literacy course, which means that they are hearing from the others how good the lessons have been". **Leah Hart, recruitment initiative manager for Central Manchester and Manchester Children's Hospital NHS Trust**

- "I would like to congratulate you on the range and format of your courses and the ease of navigation. We are currently investigating developing online courses. Is it possible to buy into yours?" **Vera Owens, Adult Learning Manager with Knowsley Library Service**

Costs and benefits

The total cost of setting up the CGfL over a three year period has been approximately £750,000, which includes staffing, tutors, infrastructure, consultancies and outsourcing. This compares well with many HE projects funded by JISC. These CGfL monies have come from 11 different funding sources and managing these separate contracts and the auditing and accountability issues involved has created a large amount of work, which we had not fully anticipated.

The CGfL team has developed experience in providing a range of web services and we are looking to develop these further within the WEA and for external bodies to generate an income to sustain some of the work from 2006.

A major current proposal is a partnership Invest to Save (ISB) application with 8 public libraries and museums to the Treasury to develop *Own Label* CGfL sites with associated staff development and

training. We believe that there is a need for discussion about how ACL providers and aggregators like CGfL could generate some income from the LSC or elsewhere for creating e-learning materials and running online *First Steps* courses. This might involve a new Quality Kitemark, organised by LSDA or Becta, to ensure maintenance of high standards.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

… for the organisations involved

The CGfL project has had substantial ambitions and has succeeded in achieving most of its stated objectives. It has been fortunate to receive positive backing from its principal funders – NOF, NWDA and Manchester City and Rochdale MB Councils. We have received very supportive comments from students and from independent evaluators from NIACE, Becta, NWDA and the Big Lottery Fund, who have all produced written reports on the work we have been undertaking.

Limited funds have prevented us from developing the functionality of the website as fast as we had hoped. While we have developed the *Skills for Life* dimension of our work, the changing funding regime for adult education has resulted in less attention being given by some funding bodies to the *First Steps* and effective widening participation role we have been able to play.

We consider that there is a central role to be played in the future by "trusted intermediary" bodies or aggregators like the WEA's CGfL and want to open up discussions with others as to how this could fit in best with the Government's wider Skills policies and the e-Strategy report: *Harnessing the Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services*. The WEA's CGfL team as part of its sustainability strategy for 2006 is developing a range of e-learning services for the ACL and VCS sectors. Details are available at www.cgfl.org.uk

… for others

Important advice for others is to watch out for the general direction of Government policies; and ensure that you are aware of new technology developments, which could impact positively on your work. These could include for instance m-learning, use of e-portfolios and developments with wireless technology and interactive TV. It is important also to see how any ILT developments can be sustained for the future. This may well mean that you look at issues about quality improvement and at how in the *Information Society* you manage and plan the curriculum differently than how it is done now.

Delegates at the ALT/LSDA conference were especially interested in the further application of the 4 principles used to develop materials and there was discussion of the extent to which a similar approach might be adopted by all eLearning developers including teachers and trainers irrespective of sector.

Involvement of the clients, matching needs to policy (and hence potential funding streams), making learning fun and engaging and then providing support at the delivery stage were all considered to be excellent steps in promoting learning with technology. Concern was expressed that only those proposals that could draw upon current funding initiatives might be developed but it was recognised that in a resource constrained regime this was an important consideration.

Another point of note was the CGfL's desire to make eLearning something that was, interactive engaging and fun and that they had managed to accomplish this with such a diverse set of clients in an apparently cost effective manner. It was noted in their engagement with clients, that the initial focus was on 'interests' and 'recreation' rather than 'learning' and it was felt that this was one contributing factor to the nature of the materials developed. Delegates were also intrigued by the wide range of clients.

It was also noted that in the main users tended to favour a 'blended' approach where the materials were employed in support of or as part of a face-to-face (f2f) encounter rather than being a wholly on-line experience.

5. Contact details

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