

Oxford and Cherwell Valley College Developing a Virtual Learning Environment

Background

Oxford and Cherwell Valley College is a large Further Education College with 13,600 learners, 60+ Skills for Life staff and around 4000+ Skills for Life enrolments. The Skills for Life department delivers in the college, workplace and community, including Train to Gain, the Army and OLASS.

The College had successfully delivered their Level 4 subject specialisms in Literacy and Numeracy using a blended approach via the college Moodle site and had also begun to note the difference that keeping in touch with learners through email, text and phone calls and sending them work made to the retention and achievement of many who were at risk of leaving. However the majority of the Skills for Life team lacked the skills, confidence and time to develop the materials and skills to use Moodle.

Aim

The College was interested in offering a more flexible and responsive provision, particularly to learners in their workplace or those being supported through the Probation Service. These learners often had difficulties either in attending, staying and achieving or because they were not funded for many hours (as in Train to Gain /workplace provision).

The College wanted to:

- Offer more flexible and responsive provision to meet individual needs
- Support learners to access missed/extra/specific work outside the classroom & create an online learning community
- Encourage independent learning
- Support teachers with contextualised materials on the VLE
- Increase & develop teachers' confidence in using & making VLE resources in a more interactive way

Method

Through the project staff developed online materials in literacy and numeracy at Level 1 for access to employment, hospitality and catering courses, and materials at Entry 1 level in both carpentry, and mechanics to support underpinning skills such as measuring or following instructions. The staff also developed on-line links to other supporting resources, both electronic and paper-based. The on-line materials developed through the project can be used in face to face classroom delivery, in blended delivery and purely as off-site/distance learning.

Staff received training and support described as inspirational from a trainer highly experienced in information sharing portals such as Moodle, which was crucial to the successful outcomes of the project. She demystified Moodle and made it accessible and easy for staff to apply in their work. She was also available for online support as needed, so that staff developed the confidence to start developing materials and their own Moodle sites.

Skills for Life Improvement Programme

Outcomes

A good number of resources were created during the project and staff confidence in creating and using online resources was greatly increased. The materials were trialled with ESOL learners who gave very positive feedback about the confidence they acquired from becoming more independent learners.

'I check the Moodle site every night before I go to bed!' (adult ESOL learner)

'The work was difficult but it is very important and in the end we could do it and we think we could do it again by ourselves.' (ESOL learners discussing Moodle & e-learning)

This report of increased learner confidence was confirmed by quantitative data that demonstrated that for learners who had used the materials, there was clear evidence that their use had contributed to a higher achievement rate in the adult literacy test at Level 1 than for those learners who had not used them.

The college feels these developments have given them a firm basis of evidence from which to increase the flexibility of their provision. They are continuing to focus staff training on incorporating more IT into all lessons as a starting point for developing a blended approach.

Learning for other providers on implementing greater flexibility in SfL delivery via the use of a VLE

- Ensure that staff are given adequate training and ongoing support to build their confidence in using VLEs.
- Don't underestimate the time it takes for staff to develop sites and materials. Particularly in the early stages, progress appears to be very slow.
- Investigate applications which are compatible with Moodle / Blackboard (other VLEs) e.g. <http://exelearning.org/>
- Ensure that quality assurance systems are adapted to reflect these ways of working: there needs to be a system for assessing the quality of material put up online, and for assessing how effective the teaching is, for example at a distance.
- Ensure substantial time in the induction phase for learners if they are to use Moodle effectively (ideally 3 hours plus) and ensure that inductions are reviewed and consolidated on a regular basis.
- Develop forms of assessment that include assessing people's levels of IT skills and ability to access broadband. This is particularly challenging in many workplaces where the limited time available requires the induction to be very focussed. For many learners new to online study, a lot of reinforcement is needed after the initial demonstration for them to feel comfortable with the approach.
- Ensure that paperwork or online systems for tracking and auditing purposes are in place and adhered to, for example for tracking online tutor time.
- Ensure technical support and back-up is available, a particular challenge for staff working off-site or off-peak in employers' premises.

Skills for Life Improvement Programme

The screenshot shows a Windows Internet Explorer browser window. The title bar reads "Course: Elements - Windows Internet Explorer provided by Oxford & Cherwell Valley College". The address bar shows the URL "https://vle.ocvc.ac.uk/moodle/course/view.php?id=634". The browser interface includes a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Favorites, Tools, Help), a search bar with "Google" entered, and a toolbar with various navigation and utility icons. The main content area displays a Moodle course page with the following elements:

- A photograph of a student working at a computer workstation.
- The text "OCVC Flexible Learning Course" in blue, underlined font.
- A photograph of a classroom setting with students at desks.
- Text: "Welcome to OCVC. This is the Skills for Life Flexible Learning Course. The purpose of this course is to improve your Literacy and Numeracy skills in the workplace and also help you to get a national qualification."
- Text: "This is a flexible learning course. This means you can study on it in different ways:"
- A bulleted list with one item: "• Traditional - studying with a teacher and using paper print-outs"

The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the Start button, several open Internet Explorer windows, and the system tray with the time 15:56.