

Wirral Metropolitan College Case Study Developing a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Background

Wirral Met is a general Further Education College in the North West. It has 720 staff and over 2100 full-time and 8500 part-time learners across its three campuses, with 2350 on Skills for Life programmes. In Skills for Life there are ten staff teaching discrete provision and 12 teaching cross-college, as well as 20 sessional staff. Since 2002 Wirral Met have been building their Skills for Life Employer Engagement provision, becoming more successful year by year in recruiting and delivering Skills for Life in the workplace. They were a partner in the North West Move-On in the NHS project, through their workplace co-ordinator authoring 'Effective Communication for Working in the NHS'. Their Train to Gain Skills for Life targets are 100 but they are currently delivering to around 500 Train to Gain learners, of whom 50% have Skills for Life needs. Increased flexibility of delivery is both a whole college and Skills for Life priority and the college has a specialist Learning Materials Unit (LMU) which provides technical expertise and staff support.

Aim

Wirral Met wanted to broaden access and enhance the flexible learning opportunities for Skills for Life learners in their workplace/employability provision, through the development of a Skills for Life Virtual Study Centre, providing on-line access to personalised blended learning packages.

Method

Their starting point was to build on a recent NW partnership success in developing materials for Move-On in the NHS by making these literacy programmes (and other materials) available to learners via the college virtual learning environment (VLE). They planned a trial with a small group of learners from a local NHS Trust, who would access a ten week modular course. Through lessons learned, they hoped to build a model of flexible good practice that could be shared internally and with others.

Outcomes

All learners passed the test at the end of the ten weeks. The course had excellent positive learner feedback which highlighted the benefits to employer and employee of improving the flexibility of delivery.

- *Flexibility of when the course work could be done*
"I could work in the evenings and weekends...You can do it when the children are in bed."
- *Flexibility of where the course work could be done*
"I came into work at 7.30 am - my husband dropped me off - so I got an hour in...
I went to the new Education Centre at Arrowse Park Hospital with the computer room."
"Being able to go home and work was fantastic because sometimes at work patients' needs get in the way..."
- *Flexibility of the pace at which learners could work*
A learner with dyslexia said, "It gives you flexibility. The work should never get too much...
You're your own little boss but there's help ...You only have to e-mail and they respond. In class you have to wait to the following week. It was 24/7 almost."

Students learned how to learn and grew in confidence, willing to continue progressing, "Sometimes you didn't think you were learning and you were. I didn't know I needed to know how to use

Skills for Life Improvement Programme

paragraphs and I do now. I didn't know I needed full stops but I did...I feel more confident writing in medical notes. I can't wait to start the next course. I'm going to do Level 2."

Another key outcome was the organisation's increased knowledge of the skills staff needed:

- *Supporting learners using a VLE requires additional skills to those of a good classroom teacher.*
- *Writing courses for a VLE demands skills above and beyond those for using a VLE.*
In Wirral the team included an expert in interactive teaching and learning methods, who was also trained in on-line teaching and learning, as well as a Skills for Life teacher very experienced in workplace delivery who had experience in writing course materials.

Learning for other providers on developing a VLE-based course

The Wirral Met managers advise, "Using a VLE is far more cost effective than staff running around doing 1:1 support ... but you must select your best staff to develop it..."

Put Skills for Life alongside a sector offer e.g. Health and Social Care... It fits in with a Whole Organisation Approach to Skills for Life and embedding LLN into vocational areas".

- *Select a team with the skills and experiences needed to develop VLE resources*
The Wirral team advises that, "Employer relationships are hard won and easily lost" so choose your best Skills for Life teachers, who between them have experience of writing interactive teaching and learning resources and experience of delivery in the workplace. Identify someone with technical expertise to manage the VLE and provide support throughout.
- *Organise and manage the development*
Pay for staff to take appropriate CPD e.g. Sheffield College's on-line LeTTOL course. Provide workspace for staff, with access to PCs and the Internet, the VLE and a phone. Ensure detailed action planning occurs to tight timescales and monitor regularly.
- *Contextualise materials and ensure they are fit for purpose*
"Because the questions were so work-related using work scenarios it was really good." A Wirral lecturer observed NHS theatre staff so she understood the barriers for her ESOL learners before writing course material. With theatre masks on, dialect was more of a barrier as was the speed at which words were spoken. Idiomatic expressions such as "pop on the bed" and "going to spend a penny" also created problems.
- *Adapt paper-based resources so they can be used via a VLE*
The Wirral team knows that you can't simply up-load paper-based materials to your VLE. Interactive tasks are needed to engage learners, with clear task objectives/instructions. The Wirral team believe: "Interactivity is the key in developing your VLE."
- *Deliver Skills for Life courses using a mix of face to face and distance learning:*
 - *The Wirral model used a face-to-face induction of three hours with double staffing*
Learners took a brief initial assessment, which was assessed by the course Skills for Life tutor whilst the learners were inducted by the technical expert into how to use the VLE: its navigation and how to communicate with the course teachers and fellow learners, how to download resources and how to complete and send module assignments etc.
The learners were then given specific diagnostic assessment tasks to provide more accurate indications about the level which they should be working towards. Additional support needs were identified, one learner needing support for dyslexia. Photos were taken of learners and staff and uploaded, personalising their on-line communication. Learners were all given memory sticks.
 - *The learners spent the next nine weeks accessing nine modules of learning on-line.*
The modules were a mix of active learning tasks and formative assessment quizzes. Later modules built on skills developed by earlier ones, so modules were up-loaded one a week, which Wirral felt was important to ensure learners' confidence grew. Practice tests were available throughout, as were links to supporting materials.
- *Monitor and support learners flexibly*
Wirral used the VLE's tracking capabilities to monitor when and for how long learners were on-line, so they could track individuals' progress. E-mail and phone calls were used to clarify whether a learner was struggling or just busy and to give appropriate support.