

Engaging Technology – Cinderella goes to the ball

Carlisle College



Project Synopsis

This project was about developing the use of portable technologies to engage and motivate Skills for Life learners. The focus was on using new and emerging technologies and those handheld devices that learners were already familiar with to encourage participation in maths and English. The project was successful in engaging existing learners at the college more fully in maths and English but was less successful in its other aim of engaging hard to reach groups.

Project Aims

The aims of the project were:

- To increase participation of priority groups on qualifications contributing to Leitch targets through the innovative use of technology in community settings.
- To improve community participation and community cohesion in Carlisle through the innovative use of portable technologies to build links with local community groups.
- To empower individuals in local communities to engage in learning through use of technology they are familiar with being used in a learning context; and through the introduction of new and exciting portable technologies.
- To enable effective embedding of literacy and numeracy provision within curriculum areas across the college through the innovative use of portable technologies.
- To improve stretch and challenge within teaching and learning across through effective use of portable technologies.
- To increase enjoyment of literacy and numeracy development activities by full-time learners.
- To empower vocational teaching staff to embed literacy and numeracy through the supported use of mobile technologies.
- Share good practice within Cumbria and throughout the North West.

The aims can be summarized into two primary targets for the project. To increase participation in Skills for Life from those groups underrepresented in education throughout the Carlisle area; and to raise engagement and achievement of existing Skills for Life and Functional/Key Skills learners within the college.

Although at the outset of this project there were some examples of the use of portable technologies being used by providers to improve Skills for Life provision the examples were very small scale and patchy. Any prior examples were very small scale and tended to be the work of individual lecturers who had embraced a single aspect of portable technology and were using it with one or two groups.

This project was innovative in its very definition of Information and Learning Technology as it focus was not on what is available in the modern technology filled classroom, but on technology that could easily be taken to the learner and the community and that learners would view as

more than a technology for learning. The project was about utilising technology that learners were familiar with, or interested in, in social or fun contexts and applying this technology to a Skills for Life learning situation.

Project Delivery

One of the key aspects contributing to the success of this project was the appointment of a Project Co-ordinator. The Co-ordinator took responsibility for the overall management and monitoring of the project. The Co-ordinator kept an overview of actions and timescales and assigned the appropriate staff actions and monitored their implementation. Without this role the project may have lacked direction. A key learning point relating to this aspect of the project is around the choice of Co-ordinator and the potential for conflicting priorities. Were we to run this project again we would look at either appointing an external candidate as Co-ordinator or assigning additional hours to a current employee rather than seconding an existing employee for part of their existing contract.

One of the planned activities involved tutors visiting a range of providers to see small scale examples of good practice in the field. The plan initially was for 5/6 staff to go out together and visit providers but this proved to be logistically difficult, as a result individual tutors went on local visits rather than group visits. These visits were still beneficial and were the project to be repeated we would have planned for this and been more targeted with regard to the individuals and the providers they visited at the planning stage.

Another key activity involved accessing local community venues and hosting open days to showcase the technology and inform the community about what we were doing and involve them as much as possible. Whilst this activity was successful and raised the interest in the project across the city the numbers of potential learners at each venue remained low and we struggled to form viable groups to run classes in community locations. We boosted this interest through targeted advertising on local radio and press releases resulting in features in local supplements. This raised interest further and recruited sufficient numbers to run some classes in deprived wards of the city. Were we to run this project again we would plan to subsidise some smaller community based groups and this would be part of the curriculum business plan. Shorter community based programmes would be planned using non-accredited learning aims and, again, this would have been part of the initial curriculum plan for the year ensuring that we were still able to meet our 10-90% split of non-accredited versus accredited learning aims.

Whilst arranging the activities described above it became clear that further consideration at the planning stage of possible partners would have been beneficial. As the project developed strong links were formed with a range of organisations such as Connexions, Barnardo's and a range of community and youth groups and this proved beneficial in identifying target learners and the best ways to target those learners. Had these partnerships been planned in advance in a more strategic manner this may have saved time and some wasted effort. However, it was difficult to commit the resources to carry out large amounts of research prior to project funding being secured.

The largest challenge at the outset of this project was how we would take a team of highly qualified and experienced lecturers with limited interest or experience in technology (and in some cases quite a strong resistance to it) and enthuse and empower them to take cutting edge technology forward to enhance the experience of their learners. This was approached by providing a range of hands-on workshops for staff using the various types of technology involved. Targets were then negotiated with tutors about which types of technology they thought they could apply and how. Tutors were then asked to demonstrate these uses to the team and supportive peer observations took place. This aspect of the project was extremely successful and all tutors, even those who had previously rejected the idea of using technology

for learning, have been effectively using some of the portable technology to motivate their learners.

A key learning point from this project has been to allow individuals (tutors) to start small and increase their use of technology at their own pace. Although there are some tutors involved in the project who are happy to embrace technology and the principles of the project wholeheartedly and in full there are others who are more cautious. Where we expected that we would need to be persuasive in order to get some tutors to experiment with the use of technology; by far the most effective approach has been to provide them with 1 item of technology and let them borrow it for a few months to experiment. When we went back to these tutors several weeks later and asked them to share what they had learnt with the team they were more than happy to do so. When given space and time they had all developed their use of the equipment with their learners. This gave them the confidence to ask to borrow alternative equipment to try out.

A key learning point for many of the tutors working on the project has been how easy it is to use much of the technology and how it can aid planning of effective sessions rather than being 'something extra' that they have to include.

In addition to this, it became clear as the project progressed that further input was needed to increase the momentum and develop further innovative uses and resources for the delivery of Skills for Life through portable technology. This resulted in the recruitment of additional tutors who were given hours specifically to develop resources for this project. As these tutors were not also being employed to deliver Skills for Life at the college at the time they were able to prioritise their time for development and dissemination.

This two tier approach of using small scale developments with existing practitioners and employing additional tutors to focus solely on the project was highly successful and, were we to run the project again, we would plan for this and initiate this approach earlier in the project.

Project Outcomes

The aims for this project could be broadly categorised into two:

Encouraging participation from underrepresented groups
Improving the quality of existing maths and English delivery in college

The first aim was not met as fully as hoped. The project was successful in engaging with a range of groups and forming links with several community based organisations. However, as mentioned above, there was limited uptake for maths and English provision. Shorted, non-accredited programmes will be planned for in future to allow for a more 'toe-dipping' approach for learners and groups.

The second group of aims was however met more fully. The quality of Skills for Life delivery has clearly improved during the life of the project and these improvements have identifiable links to the increased use of technology within the area. The lesson observation grade profile went up from an average of 2.4 to 1.8 and use of technology was identified as a strength in many sessions including observations of lecturers for whom this had previously been identified as a weakness. The lesson observation grades for Functional/Key skills also showed an average grade increase of approximately 1.5 and these also identified significant strengths in the use of technology to support learning.

It is anticipated that success rates for Skills for Life and Functional Skills will have improved during the life of this project and once these figures are finalised they will be available on the

project website. The project is still awaiting feedback from student perception survey and this will also be available on the project website once collated.

One of the main outputs of the project is the vast range of resources that have been developed and that are now being used by Skills for Life specialists and vocational tutors seeking to embed maths and English in their delivery. These resources are wide ranging in subject area and type and are accessible from a range of mobile devices. A sample of these resources along with reflections from the tutors who have developed and used them will be available on the project website.

Sharing of Project Findings

The main method for sharing the findings of this project will be via the project website which will be a public website due to go live early in the autumn term. We will be advertising the launch of the website to Skills for Life providers in the region through targeted mail shots.

The website will show the measurable outcomes of the project and reflections on the aims that have not been fully met. There will be samples of the resources produced and reflections of the tutors who developed them and of those that have worked with them. There will be case studies of activities that have taken place during the project and a key section highlighted lessons that have been learnt.

