Reinvigorating Curriculum Design
Case Study

Project title: First steps to online learning to support employment

The project created an online, modular mathematics programme for any adult learners capable of achieving a Level 2 numeracy qualification. The project has provided adult learners with an opportunity to take complete ownership of their learning and to fast-track themselves using online learning materials to gain a qualification.

Worth reading if you are interested in:
- Curriculum Design
- Progression
- Staff Development
- Use of ICT/e-learning

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Portsmouth Adult and Family Learning Service, Portsmouth City Council, Portsmouth Jobcentre Plus

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What the project set out to do and why

Feedback from partner providers and from learners themselves indicated gaps in the service's provision and, in particular, the offer of online, fast-track programmes designed to up-skill both employed and unemployed adults in English and mathematics in order to meet a variety of personal needs. These needs included gaining employment, improving promotional prospects, adults wanting to support their own children in the development of the latter's mathematical skills, improving confidence and self esteem and meeting preferred learning styles through online learning.

However, supporting the unemployed to improve their numeracy skills in order to gain employment remained a key feature of the project. Portsmouth has a rising unemployment rate (currently 3.5% of the working-age population, 0.9% above the average for the South East of England which stands at 2.6%). Portsmouth's Adult and Family Learning service also noted a change in the profile of its learners and

recognised the key role it has to play in raising the skills of learners through a variety of learning methods including digital applications.

Although the adult service offers blended-learning opportunities, based on resources available via the service's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), these are used to support face-to-face classes and the service did not, until this project, offer any fully online programmes. A significant part of this was due to the fact that the service's staff did not have the skills to design or manage such programmes as well as support learners studying online.

The project set out to support four groups of learners who wanted an alternative, flexible, online method of studying leading to a Level 2 numeracy qualification.

The learner groups were:

- Jobcentre Plus customers;

- Learners with Portsmouth's Adult and Family Learning;

- Staff within Portsmouth City Council;

- Volunteers working with Portsmouth City Council.

To ensure that the learners would benefit from an online mode of study, the project also aimed to assess the learners to ensure that they had an appropriate, fit-for-purpose, level of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills so that they could properly access the programme and subsequently achieve.

The project built on an existing Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) Project where tutors, including a mathematics tutor, were learning to use VLEs to deliver continuing professional development sessions. The skills developed by the mathematics tutor on this project would be used to support online learners through online tutorials.

For the online numeracy programme to be successful, the service recognised the need to produce high-quality learning materials which made full use of video and audio material as well as the written word. From experience, the service knew that video and audio file production is time consuming and requires skills in specific software packages. Thus, to successfully complete the project on time and within budget, the project would have to make the very best use of tutors' time and the project aimed to draw upon the skills of the service's newly-trained Digital Champions. With the Digital Champions supporting technical production, the service's tutors would be able to focus on the planning and creation of the units of learning and assessment.

What the project has achieved so far

The pivotal intended outcome, met by the project, was for the service to offer learners a quick route to a numeracy qualification. The approach has provided real choice to learners in modes of study as well as a means of assessing the potential of learners to succeed through an online mode of learning.

The staff involved with the project also benefited through the development of their own skills. Staff have been enabled to design and create interactive, appealing online programmes and have learnt new teaching skills in facilitating, managing and supporting learners using online provision.

Thus the project has secured significant improvements in continuing professional development (CPD), curriculum design and delivery, as well as learner support.

Specific achievements for the project, so far, include:

- two members of staff trained and confident in the design, creation and delivery of fully online programmes;

- protocols written and in place for managing online programmes;

- an online programme leading to Level 2 numeracy accreditation offered by the service. It is intended that the service will develop further online numeracy/mathematics modules at different levels as well as modules in other curriculum areas;

- the potential to increase learner numbers through the recruitment of new learners who can benefit from this more flexible, online mode of delivery. In its turn, the new mode of delivery will free up hours for face-to-face taught programmes for those learners who would struggle with online learning.

Finally, it is anticipated that there will be a reduction in costs to the service, effectively enabling it to meet the needs of more learners within existing budgets, thereby offering better value for money to learners.

What the project still needs to do

The materials have been produced and now trialling and evaluation of the learning modules will take place with learners. Although initial trialling and evaluation has taken place, it is necessary to take some learners through the full process to assessment and accreditation. The project team will publish and disseminate the outcomes of the project to the project's partners and stakeholders such as the JISC Network.

In order to recruit learners, the service will also need to market and promote the online module and, in particular, utilise social media in order to target those more likely to be open to online learning. This is a new area for the service. On completion of the full evaluation and review of the project, the service will ensure that the materials remain current and that a wider cohort of staff can engage with online learning development and delivery.

What the project wants to share with other schools, colleges and training providers

The following resources are available in a zipped resource folder accompanying this case study:

- Portsmouth City Council's protocols for the management of online courses (Resource 1).

- Training materials and the related staff development programme designed to support tutors, through the use of Xerte, in writing materials that are pedagogically effective for online delivery (Resources 2).

- An online Level 2 numeracy programme (Resources 3a, 3b and 3c).

- Online evaluation interviews with learners and staff.

Key learning points

The project team reported various key learning points:

- Always have more than one partner in mind in case one drops out – the project's first partner's business closed and so the project drew upon the support of an alternative partner already prepared to participate in the work.

- When working with stakeholders, never underestimate the time it takes to nurture relationships, prepare people, support and guide. The project drew on the support of various colleagues to deliver the project and each needed time to fully understand what the project was trying to achieve.

- Beware of reinventing the wheel – when the project team had finished the modules, more work had to be undertaken with staff to explain why these resources were preferable to other online resources that were readily available. This had been thought through at the start so the team was well placed to present their argument.

- Be careful about using 'old' material to create new resources – a curriculum review found many good resources that were no longer of use as the pictures or photographs were outdated or the context had changed significantly. The project team spent some time ensuring that materials would have some longevity. Inflation, for example, could make prices featured in money exercises out of date quite quickly.

- It took the project longer than expected to review, plan and create the new modules. Every step generated discussions that, although beneficial, added time to tasks.

- Make sure the work is initiative-proof! The project team wanted to ensure that the learning outcomes were not only fit for achieving adult numeracy qualifications but that they would also support the accreditation of functional skills and meet other accreditation purposes.

- Understand the impact of decisions for your learners. The project insisted that the service's core tutors undertook some online training so that they fully understood the benefits and pitfalls of this form of learning. This experience prepared the tutors to talk honestly and openly to learners about the process. It also highlighted that the service needed to do more work with staff on using digital methods of learning.

- Be prepared for expansion. As a result of the project, the four 'Hampshire' local authorities are now coming together to explore how efficiencies through online training can be made sub-regionally.

- Keep an eye on sustainability. The service now has staff trained to create and deliver online learning which will impact on other programmes.