



WALES: Work-based Access to Learning through E-Services

Project Overview

The WALES project aims to explore the potential for mobile technologies and social software to enhance the experience of on-line, distance learners. Specifically, it is testing and evaluating how such tools can contribute to the delivery of a personalised learning experience to employees of SMEs across Wales undertaking work-based learning.

Mobile technology is ubiquitous and there is increasing use of on-line social networking software, particularly amongst young people. The way in which the technologies are used is the choice of the individual and by using them regularly they are both skilled and comfortable with them.

The intention of the project is to explore the potential to use the same technologies to improve the way on-line learners are supported by tutors and other members of the e-learning delivery team.

Mobile Technology

The use of mobile phones and PDAs with wireless connectivity means that all learners can send and receive communications, information and media files wherever and whenever they want. The portability and 'always connected' nature of the technology means that it can add significantly to the flexibility and convenience of engaging with aspects of on-line learning.

The WALES project is evaluating the use of a Java based application that can be downloaded and installed on mobile devices that enables them to communicate directly with Moodle. **MobiGlam** allows the learners and tutors to receive alerts when postings are made to their Moodle forums, to receive announcements and reminders of forthcoming events, to view their grades and a range of other services and activities.

Early feedback has confirmed that both the learners and the tutors found that the introduction of mobile functionality had the potential to make their learning activities and interventions more flexible and time efficient by allowing them to happen on the move.

Two extended periods of delivery with four different cohorts of learners are planned in the current phase of the project to evaluate the validity of these initial findings.

Social Networking Software

There has been a rapid growth in the use of social networking software and social resource sharing in recent years. On-line content management and communications services that have been provided, in an educational context, by virtual learning environment software applications, are now freely available and being used in a social context.

On-line distance learning has been perceived as lacking in the social interaction provided by campus-based learning. The use of social networking software has the potential to provide a much richer experience for the on-line learner in this regard.

As with mobile technology, the WALES project aims to investigate, apply, test and evaluate the use of social software (SNS) as part of the on-line learner support mix.

This aspect of the project began with a scoping study of current developments and use of SNS, followed by a SWOT analysis that critically appraised the suitability of its use in an educational context.

Initial feedback from learners indicated that there are barriers to implementation. For the lifelong learners and work-based learners, the barrier is a simple one: in the main, they don't use social software at all. For those (younger) learners that do, there are messages being received that they are not comfortable with their social space being invaded.

Project Planning

The project plan is to explore, with both learners and tutors in the four HE in FE programmes involved, the benefits of the current use of mobile and social networking technologies and services. It will use the messages received to summarise the current level of applicability and make recommendations based on expected future developments and embedding of mobile technologies and social networking software in on-line learning delivery.