

Fermanagh College

Title: Putting the teacher into online learning

Background

Fermanagh College of Further and Higher Education provides education and training to approximately 12,000 full and part-time students from County Fermanagh and beyond. Based in Enniskillen, it delivers over 750 vocational and non-vocational programmes, covering a wide range of subjects.

Challenge

In recent years, presentational aids have become commonplace, both in teaching and in the wider business world. Today's professionals need to be able to present information well, often using *Microsoft PowerPoint*®, which is widely used in teaching.

While the use of presentational aids can enhance the delivery of learning for those attending the session, they may be of limited use for those unable to be present. Although presentations can easily be made available online, they may have little value if the viewer did not attend the session, or is unaware of the wider context.

This problem was often faced at Fermanagh by students unable to attend sessions at college because of work or home commitments. Tutors published presentations online through the college Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) following lectures and tutorial sessions, but students continued to ask for clarification about the content. This had an impact on tutor workload as well as the learning experience for some students, as effective participation in later discussions was somewhat curtailed.

Furthermore, feedback from students was very negative, with the overall feeling being that the presentations were of little use, being merely a list of bullet points. One student, when asked what was wrong, summed up by saying "what's missing here is the teacher." This was the catalyst for change at Fermanagh.

What e-learning offers

Institutions often have very differing ideas of how e-learning can best be implemented to deliver effective learning. At Fermanagh College, Curriculum Director, Elizabeth Morrison, firmly believes that power must be devolved to teaching teams if the true potential of e-learning is to be realised.

This has led to strong, well-focused teams which feel they have a stake in what they are developing and delivering. The driving force in teaching and learning has been 'pedagogy first', an approach which has also been followed in the development of e-learning. This approach manifests itself at Fermanagh in a very practical focus on how to achieve an enhanced learning experience through the use of simple technologies linked closely to classroom activity.

Computing Lecturer, Hector McLennan, began to investigate how better use could be made of presentations for students who could not attend taught sessions. He started using *Microsoft Producer*® which is designed for use with *Microsoft PowerPoint*® and enables users to create, edit, synchronise, and publish rich-media presentations to give the look and feel of a live event.

This was taken up by a team led by Vice Principal Sean Henry, who looked at how adding audio and video to static presentations could make them an integral part of the teaching process. In effect, the aim is to turn class lectures and practical sessions into in-house devised "learning objects", directly linking e-

learning with classroom practice, allowing use and re-use by students time and again.

The software is used to capture sessions on video with supporting audio and synchronised with PowerPoint slides. HTML and images are then added and published for viewing in a web browser, producing dynamic online presentations which aim to engage the learner more effectively than static presentations.

Producer 2003 complies with the metadata standards prescribed by e-learning specification and standards groups such as the Instructional Management Systems (IMS) Global Learning Consortium and the Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM), meaning that published works can be used with a range of systems.

Benefits for Learners

Learners can view practical demonstrations with accompanying commentary and listen to lectures at any time, this has proved crucial for those who cannot get to sessions in person. In addition, it is used as a valuable reinforcement for classroom teaching. This was illustrated by one learner who described his tendency to forget some concepts soon after the class, he was able to revisit the lecture online to recapture the experience and fill in gaps in understanding. Furthermore, the direct relevancy to the classroom content and activities was essential in supporting and building on the learner's knowledge and understanding.

Whole course-taught sessions can be compiled and produced on CD-ROMs for students who may have difficulty with internet access. These are a very useful resource for students, underpinning learning and providing a valuable aid to revision. The automatically generated table of contents compiled from slide titles makes it easy for learners to jump to the content of interest.

This approach allows learners to reflect and bring higher order questioning to the learning process. Firstly, by self-engaging in the learning, identifying content that they were unsure of and exploring it at their own pace. Secondly, having more thoroughly understood the basic concepts using the online materials, learners could participate more actively in classroom activity. In the words of one learner, a purely transmission approach usually associated with notes or presentations online has thus been transformed into a "meaningful learning experience".

The approach has led to major changes in how class contact time is utilised to provide benefits both to learners and staff, and is viewed very positively by the learners. One comment was that it puts the missing ingredient (the teacher) into such materials.

Key points for effective practice

PowerPoint slides can be thought of as a storyboard to guide the process of constructing an effective presentation and commentary, which may already exist in the lecturer's mind, but this needs to be well planned to allow the recording to be quick and effective.

Properly preparing the video and audio recording is important to ensure a good quality experience for the learner, including simple techniques such as the use of backdrops and acoustics. In attempting to mirror a classroom experience, learners will expect a high quality output.

One problem to be aware of when using generically produced learning objects is that these objects may not fit well with the curriculum. Objects produced in-house should have direct curriculum relevance in order to be effective aids to

learning. Combining these with other professionally produced materials such as NLN materials can provide a good blend of class-specific and generic subject content.

Barriers

Learning to use the *Microsoft Producer*® software takes time for tutors and learners alike. This could be perceived as a negative factor, but the time invested should bring valuable rewards in the long-run.

Recording video and audio presentations is time consuming and costly, however, digital equipment is becoming less expensive and easier to use with desktop computers. Lecturers should be able to achieve the quality they desire without high cost production.

Final word

The development of professional learning aids has been a long and complex process. Learning to use new software can be time consuming and difficult. However, this should be viewed as a learning experience itself, rather than an insurmountable barrier to success. The team ethos at Fermanagh has provided a supporting infrastructure for those involved and has enabled e-learning to move forward in a meaningful way enhancing the work of the College.

Further details, The team at Fermanagh College are happy to discuss and advise on any aspect of this approach. Contact Hector McLennan via email at: mclennanh@fermanaghcoll.ac.uk

Microsoft Producer:

www.microsoft.com/office/powerpoint/producer/prodinfo/default.mspx