

Case Studies in E-learning Practice – Final Report

Introduction

This report describes the activities involved in the Case Studies in e-learning Practice project provided by Netskills, Newcastle University for the e-learning and Pedagogy Programme of the JISC.

It covers:

- the process involved in the selection of sites
- conducting the face-to-face interviews at the case study sites
- the use of the template used to gather information during interviews
- a summary of the results (Appendix B)
- recommendations for future development

Methodology Employed

Selection of case studies

An initial list of possible case studies was drawn up from suggestions supplied by Netskills staff and contacts, and the JISC e-pedagogy team and consultants.

Following discussion contact was made with the most promising suggestions via email and telephone.

The final selection was based on a number of criteria, these included:

- examples from a range of educational organisations including HE, FE, ACL, and 6th Forms
- innovative or novel approaches
- the ability to demonstrate success and inspire learners
- the geographic spread – it was desirable to have examples from across the UK
- use of different types of e-learning technologies and systems
- a range of subject areas

Some case studies were stronger in some of these criteria than others but the aim was to produce case studies that demonstrated a range of approaches.

The project team also needed to gauge the level of enthusiasm of the staff concerned with respect to the proposed case study.

It was necessary to take into account practical factors, such as:

- the ease with which key staff could be contacted
- whether staff and learners were willing to take part in the case study and were available during the period of the study
- the need to gain approval from management had some influence over the choice of studies

At this stage some studies did not proceed because of these factors.

The selection of the final 10 case studies were made in discussion with the JISC e-pedagogy team.

Planning the interviews

Once the case studies had been selected sites were contacted initially via email or telephone. However in some cases responses were very slow with the project team needing to make a number of calls in order to fully describe the project, ask if the staff concerned were interested in taking part and arrange for the site visit.

The interviews were based on the template provided by Helen Beetham (see appendix A for full template). This was used as the outline for the interview discussions and proved very useful and practical. However, initial discussions, conducted by telephone and email, allowed use of the template to be refined to take account of local circumstances and to make sure that all relevant stakeholders would be present.

The interviews followed the structure of the template:

Context. The main aim of this section was to gather information about learners, curriculum and environment. Teachers were asked to identify problems or issues that were a priority when choosing a particular approach.

Learning activity or approach. This section looked at why e-learning was adopted and, once the decision was made, why a particular approach was taken. Importantly, it looked at:

- the learning activities
- the tools and facilities used
- the content and resources (if appropriate)
- the time scales and sequence of activities

Outcomes for learners and their evaluation. This section looked at the specific planned outcomes such as skills, knowledge, measuring success, relationship with other courses, experience, etc. It also discussed the evaluation of learner's outcomes such as tutor observation and reflection, and benefits for learners.

The success of using the template was based on it being broad enough to be useful in any context and not using it in a restrictive way. Interviewers allowed teachers to range widely in the discussions and adapted the template where necessary, in particular, omitting sections which were not appropriate.

Some studies demonstrated clear links to existing educational practice in the design and development of e-learning with particular thought being given to pedagogic issues. However a number focused on and demonstrated the benefits of using e-learning to solve particular problems providing courses or improving the learning experience. The template proved useful in drawing out relevant information regardless of the approach being taken in providing e-learning.

Conducting the interviews

The visits took the form of a semi structured interview with the key member, or members, of staff at the institution concerned. The length of this interview varied from approximately one hour to three hours and normally involved a demonstration of the e-learning technique being used. Other relevant staff and learners were also interviewed as part of the information gathering process.

In a number of cases the site visits were arranged in collaboration with the Video Case Studies team. This worked well giving the video team the chance to gain

detailed information in preparation for the follow-up visit at which the video would be recorded

Interviews were normally conducted using a Dictaphone allowing the interviewer to concentrate on the discussion rather than note taking. However, staff were often concerned about the use of taped material so were assured that the taped material was only used in writing up the case study and would not be passed on. They were also assured that they would see final drafts of the case studies before publication. In a number of cases staff were very candid in the views and would not have been happy to see some of their stronger statements published.

On returning from the visit the project team member wrote up the interview, discussions (including with learners) and demonstrations based on the Dictaphone record, their notes and their thoughts on the particular case study.

Once the exact format, style and themes covered by the case studies had been finalised the initial visit report was re-written to conform to these guidelines. An initial draft was then submitted to the Programme Manager for comment. Amendments were then made based upon the feedback from the Programme Manager.

Recommendations

An enormous amount has been learnt during the Case Studies in e-learning Practice project. As with many projects of this type, having completed the project it would be very desirable to take on a follow-up or similar project in order to implement the lessons learnt.

Future projects need to pay particular attention to the following issues:

Timescale

The timescale specified for the project was tight – this was recognised from the start by both the project team and the Programme Manager and there were good reasons for this being the case. This led to much of the work needing to be completed during the examination period for a number of institutions meaning that teachers were often unavailable. Also learners were not always available because some courses were coming to an end. The project team needed to be very flexible and persistent in making contact with key staff. In some cases many email messages were sent and calls made in order to get a case study off the ground, however, this was generally a fruitful process.

The tight timescale also meant that a number of other issues arose relating to communication and the specifications.

Communication

Some of the issues which arose during the project resulted from communication difficulties between the various project stakeholders (the project team and management, the programme team and consultants etc.). By the end of the project communication was much improved with regular contact between the Programme Manager and the project management. Input from project team members, consultants,

JISC staff, Steering Group members etc was channelled through the project management and the Programme Manager.

Output specifications

The project highlighted the need to be very clear about specifying the expected outputs clearly. The important issues of style, format, audience, software detail, etc were not completely resolved until late in the project, this was partly related to the communications issue.

Expected outcomes

It was originally intended that the Case Studies project would be able to demonstrate a range of e-pedagogy models and, in particular, pilot the e-learning Models Desk Study. However, it was agreed that because of other projects and timing this would not be required. Even so some themes from the e-pedagogy models were mapped to the case studies. Some studies did demonstrate the use of e-learning pedagogy but many were a response to a particular problem or need to improve the learning experience.

Final Word

The enthusiasm for the development of the case studies from the teachers involved demonstrated clearly to the Project Team that the community is keen to receive this type of product. Many teachers are keen to use e-learning but lack the confidence and knowledge to take the first step. Examples of real and practical uses of e-learning developed by their peers are just what they are looking for. They are particularly interested in practical learning activities, pedagogic soundness and the practical issues involved.

Future projects, perhaps returning to some of the case studies in this project at a later date or looking at further good examples of practice, will be required.

Future case study projects will be enhanced by the lessons learnt and the contacts made as part of this project.

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