

NUFC Learning Centre

Title: Using individualised learning to engage and motivate adult learners

Background

From its inception in 1998 as part of the 'Playing for Success' e-learning initiative, the Learning Centre at Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) has grown into a substantial and highly successful provider of adult and community learning in the heart of Newcastle.

Located in the main stand at St James' Park, the home of NUFC, the Centre is a purpose built learning facility, fully equipped to deliver a wide range of e-learning. The study support centre is a modern learning environment equipped with the latest computer technology. Costing over 1.6 million pounds, the Centre now provides learning opportunities to over 1,000 learners every week.

The NUFC Learning Centre has won the Community Award in Computing Magazine's Computing Awards for Excellence. The judging panel praised the Centre's clear vision for e-learning and its work in widening participation.

Challenge

Initially the Centre concentrated its activities on schoolchildren, providing study support sessions for primary and secondary school pupils five nights per week. Working with each school in Newcastle over a six week block of study, the focus is on raising literacy, numeracy and ICT standards using the e-learning environment and the medium of football as motivational and curriculum tools.

From the start, Phil McBride, the NUFC Learning Centre Manager, recognised that the powerful draw of the football club could be harnessed to help learning. Phil was keen to ensure that all learning was delivered electronically, meaning that pupils did not have to bring anything with them. Three hundred young learners each week now extend their learning in a completely paperless environment.

Following the Centre's success with schoolchildren, demand arose to provide similar access to learning for adults. The successful formula that worked for younger learners was used to attract adults who would not attend traditional educational institutions.

In order to develop sustainable adult and family learning, the Centre's management realised that additional funding streams would be required. Partnerships with the main lifelong learning institutions, Newcastle College, University of Northumbria and Newcastle University, were formed to help provide this funding.

The challenge was to create an informal, relaxed, welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in which adults and families could learn, using resources provided through e-learning. The new centre was located inside the main stand at the football ground in order to provide an exciting, informal and attractive environment.

What e-learning offers

Working with their partner organisations, a range of e-learning opportunities have been developed to initiate and sustain individual adult and family learning. The Centre now offers a wide variety of ICT courses, including both informal and accredited courses. Informal courses are run in topics such as basic use of a PC, digital photography, using email and the internet. Accredited courses on offer include New CLAIT, CLAIT Plus and the European Computer Driving Licence, in addition to the full range of learndirect courses.

All adult courses are offered on a drop-in basis in three hour slots throughout each week. As part of the process of encouragement, the Centre Manager personally meets every learner as they first arrive at the Centre in order to put them at ease. There are no formal or set teaching sessions - instead adult learners are encouraged to select activities from the extensive range of learning programmes on offer.

The e-learning is delivered using a mixture of online materials, including both commercially produced materials and those that have been devised in-house. The aim is to empower learners by adopting a user-centered approach to e-learning. Online materials used include interactive tutorials in basic skills in which learner actions influence the outcomes. Other materials are learning objects in a variety of subjects with learning contextualised around a focused activity to achieve a set outcome. In addition, a range of simulation packages are available which allow learners to apply knowledge in a meaningful context.

In the more formal courses such as ECDL, online activities are supported by booklets that have been created in-house, which learners work through at their own pace. Although there are no formal taught sessions, a team of 40 tutors are available throughout each week for learners to call upon to support individual learning.

While adult learners are completely free to pick and choose their own learning programmes, many choose to move on to accredited programmes once they have used the Centre for a substantial period of time. Progression is offered through the partnership organisations to further and higher education.

Adult learners who wish to move on to higher education, but lack the necessary study skills, are helped to develop a 'toolbox' of study skills based around the use of e-learning.

Benefits for learners

A key factor in the success of the NUFC Learning Centre is the development of the social aspect surrounding adult learning. Sharing the learning experience right from the start, learners were able to move forward as a group. The success of this approach is evidenced by the low drop-out rate.

Family learning, through programmes such as 'Hit the Net', bring children and parents together to develop their ICT skills through an informal and fun approach to using the internet with a competition and prizes each week. The popularity of this course has led to a waiting list for places.

Adult learner, Margaret Redhead, has been attending the Centre for two years and has completed a number of courses. Margaret particularly values the informal approach and support provided in a pressure free, e-learning based environment.

For learner Pauline Graham, the buzz surrounding the Centre is an added attraction. The open plan layout provides children and adults with learning in adjacent areas, giving an extra vibrancy to each session. This is often enhanced by celebrities such as Alan Shearer dropping in for a chat.

Key points for effective practice

Michael Leach, Adult Learning tutor, believes the relaxed atmosphere, the freedom of choice offered by e-learning and the quiet but effective support are key elements in the success of the adult learning at the Centre.

By providing a range of learning packages, a completely flexible learning menu is on offer to adults to pick and choose as they wish. Through 'digestible' chunks, self-directed study is facilitated and learning is available when the learner requires, whether from the Centre or at home.

The social aspect of adult learning should not be underestimated. It is one of the key elements in the success of the adult provision at the NUFC Learning Centre.

Barriers

Lack of a clear strategy for the development of e-learning is a real barrier to success according to Phil McBride. From the beginning the NUFC Learning Centre mapped out a clear vision of how e-learning should develop. A key component was the drive towards creating a paperless environment with all learning online. This was an ambitious aim which was initially achieved with the schools initiative before attempting it with their ACL provision.

Final word

Returning to learning can be daunting for many adults, even in the exciting surroundings that exist at Newcastle United Football Club. Phil McBride believes that success comes from empowering adult learners to develop their own learning and this is best done in the relaxed informal setting provided by an attractive e-learning environment.

Further details: www.nufclearningcentre.co.uk