

Working Men's College

Title: Improving literacy and numeracy for disenfranchised groups through e-learning

Background

The Working Men's College (WMC) situated in Camden, North London, is the oldest surviving adult education institution in Europe. Originally associated with the Co-operative Movement, today it is a true community college, where development continues to be rooted in the liberal education tradition of the Workers' Educational Association.

Based in an area of great ethnic diversity with a high proportion of asylum seekers and refugees, WMC delivers an extensive outreach provision. Working closely with community groups, tenants' associations and other local providers, the College provides increasing access to education for excluded and disadvantaged learners through their Adult and Community Learning (ACL) programmes.

Challenge

ACL provision at the College is co-ordinated through an outreach initiative which takes learning out into the community. Classes have been established at over 15 locations and serve a wide variety of communities including Chinese, Somali, and Filipino, together with homeless and refugees' associations.

With such a diverse multicultural population to serve, an important area of ACL provision is based around 'Skills for Life' courses aimed at assisting integration into society. Literacy, Numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) form an important strand of the programme.

Traditionally, however, recruitment and retention among learners from wide-ranging ethnic backgrounds has proved problematic. Mike McCombe, ICT Programme Manager at WMC, believed that e-learning offered the potential to overcome some of the problems faced by the College in engaging and retaining learners from widely differing social and cultural backgrounds.

As part of the audit process for developing e-learning, WMC looked at a number of initiatives. One of those considered was *Classroom Performance System (CPS)* which can be used in conjunction with a computer and interactive whiteboard to develop class learning.

What e-learning offers

Experience allied to analysis has shown that culturally diverse ESOL groups, most of whom lack understanding of the English language at the outset, learn best if a full range of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (VAK) principles are incorporated into lessons.

The interactive whiteboard is used to get learners more actively involved in learning, with tutors encouraging learners to come up to the whiteboard and contribute, either by writing on the board or touching it to select options. In this way, learners actively participate physically and mentally, rather than sitting passively in the classroom.

CPS is a hand-held interactive voting system which links to software installed on the tutor's computer. It allows images, along with related questions and answers, to be projected onto the whiteboard in whatever sequence the tutor wishes. Each learner has their own hand-held unit at their desk, which is used to answer questions - numbers on the remote control correspond to particular answers. Responses are tallied by computer and feedback is instantly available to the whole class. This enables the tutor to elicit a response from every learner simultaneously, without

embarrassing anyone who selects the wrong answer, making learning fun but also highly productive.

Everyday life scenarios are frequently used on ESOL courses to promote use of language and reinforce understanding. At WMC, e-learning has been incorporated into lessons to deliver learning through these scenarios in an interactive and engaging way.

A typical example is a lesson where learners must create a shopping list and decide which shops they need to visit. In the first part of the lesson the class is asked to create the shopping list, deciding on the items to list with the help of the tutor. Individual members of the class write items up on the whiteboard. The shopping list is then saved by the system and can be linked with the next stage of the lesson.

In the next stage of the lesson, the tutor displays images alongside pre-prepared questions, relating them back to the shopping list created earlier. The questions are displayed on the board and the whole class reads through them together, with the aid of word highlighting. For example, an image of a fishmonger could be displayed, followed by a series of questions asking what can be bought from this retailer. The group are then asked to vote on what they think is the correct answer.

The use of *CPS*, in tandem with an interactive whiteboard, allows the full range of VAK principles to be used in a class setting. A non-threatening environment is created which encourages all learners to participate.

Benefits for learners

The focused class activity ensures full participation in each lesson and allows the tutor to track learner responses and monitor individual progress. Remedial action can then be properly planned and delivered where problems are apparent. The tutor can take a different role, either "drawing into the background" to allow learners to take control, or participating as a learner themselves as an equal partner in the activity.

The improvement to language skills has been marked for many in the group, several of whom possessed few English literacy skills at the beginning. Complete beginners have been able to consolidate the development of reading and writing skills, which has helped develop their confidence and motivation to learn. As well as improved understanding of spoken English, many learners are able to produce written work of a good standard and converse at a reasonable level after only twelve weeks on the programme.

Since introducing the system, recruitment has improved. Attendance on ESOL courses using this approach has risen while retention has markedly increased. Many learners have expressed a view that their new found skills and understanding have given them a sense of freedom, widening horizons for many who felt disenfranchised. In some cases the course has led the learners to further vocational or higher education.

Key points for effective practice

Lessons should be prepared in advance to engage the learner and focus on specific objectives. The learner should be helped to practise retrieval and application of information to answer set questions.

Opportunities for feedback should be provided to allow learners to understand why they missed specific questions. The use of repetition should further support the learning process.

Timely feedback from the learners to the tutor, for example, through demonstrating understanding at the end of the lesson, can also identify which aspects of the learning have been successful and which need further development.

Full participation is key to the engagement and enjoyment of the learners. Individuals who have initial problems should be assisted to avoid exclusion. The technology can be used in many ways, and simple methods can be developed into more complex uses. New users should not be afraid to start with simple but effective examples.

Barriers

Achieving good results from the use of e-learning can sometimes demand a high level of responsibility, time, and effort from the tutor. While there are undoubted gains to be made, this approach will not suit all levels so careful targeting is essential. Focusing on active engagement may involve changes to teaching methods, and redefining the relationship between tutors and learners.

With new technology, tutors need to acknowledge there will be a learning curve for them as well as the learners.

Final word

Using techniques that promote enjoyment and active participation has seen positive results, with attendance 5-10% higher, and learners demonstrating better progression from this course than other similar courses.

Satnam Gill, Principal, says "it changes the teaching environment... you want the students to be actively involved, and students really enjoy that".

Further details

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