

JISC

Effective Practice with e-Learning

An abstract digital illustration featuring a blue and purple color palette. It includes several playing cards, such as the Ace of Hearts and the Ace of Clubs, which are partially visible and layered. The cards are set against a background of soft, glowing light rays and geometric shapes, creating a sense of depth and movement.

Case Studies

Evaluate facts and concepts

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Darlington

e-Learning in practice case studies

Evaluate facts and concepts

What is the intended outcome?

Learners can evaluate facts and concepts and apply their knowledge to specific contexts.

What is established practice?

- Under the instruction of the practitioner, learners are provided with opportunities to rank and evaluate sources of information
- Learners are helped to interpret facts, make comparisons and recognise subjectivity in face-to-face group work and practitioner-led sessions
- Learners develop skills in synthesising key findings from resources
- Practitioners provide formative assessment opportunities and feedback

What advantages can e-learning bring?

- Learners' evaluative skills can be developed through activities based on online resources prior to face-to-face sessions
- Asynchronous, peer-to-peer learning through collaborative tools can encourage reflection and evaluation beyond class contact time
- Practitioners are less focused on marking and more able to concentrate their efforts on preparing analytical and evaluative activities
- Learners can develop evaluative skills through online resources while undertaking work-based learning or travel abroad

Developing evaluative skills

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College,
Darlington

Background

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College (QESFC) in Darlington is a high achieving sixth form college catering for approximately 1700 learners, typically aged between 16 and 19 years. The majority of learners are studying full-time on Advanced Level courses, including A/AS-Levels and vocational A-Levels.

The challenge

One of the courses adopting the use of e-learning at QESFC is the AVCE Advanced Level in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). As with many vocational A-Levels, the learning and teaching is supported through independent work on a series of individual and group assignments. Second year double award learners also undertake a one-week work placement, allowing learners to apply their learning in the workplace and gain confidence and skills that are valued by employers and universities. These factors mean that much of the learning does not take place in the traditional classroom.

The e-learning advantage

Jackie Wilson, Assistant Principal at QESFC, was particularly impressed by the fact that the College's Virtual Learning Environment (ClassFronter) allows the established pedagogical models of learning and teaching at the College to be applied online. Supporting problem-based learning and group collaboration, use of the VLE allowed learners to develop evaluative skills and reinforced their ability to learn independently.

All classrooms and computer laboratories at the College are well-equipped, most with interactive whiteboard facilities and wall displays. A dedicated suite of computer rooms is also available for teaching ICT and Computing. This allows e-learning to be used effectively as part of a traditional taught class, in addition to having the resources and discussion facilities available to learners off-site.

A real advantage of online resources is that learners can concentrate their efforts during the classroom sessions on learning, rather than on note-taking, knowing that course materials will be available to download from the VLE. They can also familiarise themselves with the topics to be used in the next class and prepare questions in advance, whetting their appetite for critical analysis.

For example, in one assignment, learners were asked to critically evaluate a web-based resource and post their observations to a discussion board. This activity was initially structured as a taught session in the computer suite, but then extended outside the timetabled classes with learners contributing to the discussion over several days. The tutor then worked through their contributions in the next class, providing feedback and stimulating further discussion. The ability to reflect and consolidate in the intervening period, as well as contribute to the discussion online, led to learners participating more in the classroom sessions.

Key points for effective practice

- Developing learners' evaluative skills is never easy. Empowering them to critically assess well-chosen resources and share their findings with other learners can be a powerful way of developing their confidence and skills.
- Giving practitioners the freedom to use an online system in a way that complements their own pedagogical approaches has proved to be a motivational factor in encouraging experimentation with online provision. Eric Walker, Cross College ICT Co-ordinator, believes this approach has led to much greater and more enthusiastic use being made of e-learning than if strict policies for use had been laid down.

Final word

Making the decision to implement e-learning throughout the delivery of a course is difficult, but, as Jackie Wilson says, "You have never invested too much to change." Proof of the positive effect of e-learning at QESFC can be seen from a recent Ofsted inspection which highlights the College's approach to promoting effective independent learning. (www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/manreports/1496.htm)

