Case study

Association of Colleges in Eastern Region (ACER)

Digital Approaches to English and Maths

- using technology to support learners on traineeships and apprenticeships

- Bedford College

PROJECT LEAD

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Regional Projects Manager

1. About the Provider

Bedford College is a large general further education college located in Bedfordshire. There are three main campuses, two of which are in Bedford. The other campus is in Shuttleworth and offers land-based programmes. The college offers academic and vocational courses to students from 14 upwards and runs a large number of apprenticeship programmes involving 1200 local companies and organisations.

2. The Challenge

About the practitioners

The project team consists of three practitioner/researchers and a member of the IT Support Team.

Paula Hobday is the project manager. Paula is Assistant Director for Computing within the college.

Austyn Beeching-Smith is a Motor Vehicle lecturer who also delivers Functional Skills programmes for learners on apprenticeship programmes. Austyn is particularly keen to develop digital resources for use in maths support.

Kerry Fellowes is an assessor and trainer in Health and Social Care. Kerry teaches one day a week and works the rest of the time as an assessor. Nina sharp has responsibility for additional learning support and also has Functional Skills experience within the PPS areas (Business, Care, ESOL, Travel/Tourism….).

Nadine Neita is a member of the IT/Moodle Support Team, Nadine has been supporting the team with the development of the Functional Skills Moodle site which was originally developed by Tim Trodd.

At the start of the project Bedford College had recently taken over the running of some engineering apprenticeships from a local private training provider. This presented some challenges as a significant number of those apprentices were nearing the end of their programme and some had not commenced Functional Skills training whilst others were not attending college.

The college have a well-developed Moodle learning platform and so to deal with this challenge the team wanted to incorporate a Functional Skills training package within Moodle to support the development of English and maths and provide remote access to apprenticeship learners.

3. The Solution

Improving learner engagement with the online platform

As the college already had a well-developed Moodle learning platform, the team were keen to develop it further to include access to carefully selected English

and maths resources and an automated tracking system to enable learners and tutors to track progress. Learners would be offered support by on-line chat or through Skype or telephone calls with a tutor.

The initial focus was to develop and trial resources to support apprentices undertaking Functional Skills at level 2, with a view to expanding the approach to other learner groups in the future. The team were fully supported by senior management and were allocated time to develop the Moodle site. The individual team members researched the variety of tools and resources available and selected the most appropriate materials to support their own delivery. A dedicated member of the IT team then developed the submitted resources for inclusion on the Moodle site.

Links to the BKSB Functional Skills diagnostic tests were set up so learners could work through the initial assessment as a starting point. Learners have access to reading materials, developmental resources and practice papers prior to completing the online test. The course calendar identifies key dates.
The discussion forum and chat facility enables online communication.
The Moodle support link automatically sends queries to the selected tutor or member of the IT team to respond to, depending on the nature of the question.
The grade book facility enables learners and tutors to track progress. There are also useful links to digital technologies introduced through the ACER project workshops, providing college tutors with easy access to a variety of freely available and useful tools for content creation and online communication.

Learners are able to download worksheets from the Targeted Maths and Targeted English sections. Austyn trialled the Maths site with a group of 4 motor vehicle apprentices, over a 5 week period. Learners indicated they – *'enjoyed learning through the Moodle course. They found it easy to use and the diagnostics and resources worked well. They enjoyed being able to access the resources whilst not in college'.*

Austyn also used Skype as a means of keeping in touch with his learners.

Nina produced a series of Padlet boards for English; currently learners access these via a hyperlink to the individual Padlets but the team are investigating ways in which to embed the Padlet boards directly within the Moodle site.

4. Reflections

Austyn trialled the Moodle site with a group of motor vehicle apprentices over a term. The maths course worked well for these learners and the feedback was positive. Future learner groups will have more time to fully access the course materials and will directly benefit from this.

The pilot of the Moodle site took place at a particularly busy time for the employer which presented difficulties for the employer in allowing the apprentices time to access the resources during working hours. A better response may be achieved in future by sharing the benefits of the Moodle course directly with the employer at the start of the learner's programme.

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Nevertheless there were clear benefits for the learners who had remote access to the Moodle site -

 'It has made a substantial difference to the apprentices' learning.'

Tools and Websites

Whilst Nadine has had a key role in helping the team to develop resources for inclusion on the Moodle site, all the team members have contributed resources to the site. Austyn used Skype successfully to communicate with his learner group and Kerry frequently uses Skype to carry out assessments and give feedback to learners, often from her smart phone.

Kerry is also trialling Nearpod which allows real time 1:1 communication with learners across a range of devices.

Austyn has been using Skype, Dropbox and Padlet and has changed his view about using some elements of technology-
'I have historically avoided anything to do with social media, social media is a big part of society and in that respect I have updated my appreciation of these things.'

Paula has begun to use Skype and YouTube in teaching –
'I have used these tools before but not in teaching, I think I now use these tools more in teaching definitely.'

Nina also looked at Padlet, Skype and YouTube and developed some useful Padlets to support Functional English. She has also been using **Screencast-o-matic** to create video tutorials and sharing her knowledge with tutors –

'I have a meeting with a Functional Skills tutor later who wants to put together a training session on computers – I'll be able to show him how to do that using screencasting'.

Nina conducted a student survey about using digital technology and was surprised at the results –

'It was clear from their responses that they all want tutors to use digital technologies in every session. We didn't expect them to want to use technology in every session.'

Benefits for practitioners

For all team members participating in the project it has expanded their knowledge and raised awareness of the range of free tools and software available. Austyn commented –

"When we started exploring just how many apps and free software is available I was actually staggered".

Paula found the ACER webinars and workshops of particular value. The team have been introduced to a wide range of digital technologies that they had not known were available. The opportunities to work collaboratively and share ideas with others involved in the project have been of considerable benefit.

Assistive Learning Technologies

Nina found the ACER workshop on accessibility tools of particular interest and has begun using these tools with her learners –

'We do buy licences for text to speech software for our learners, which they have to pay for or we provide them on loan, but they won't necessarily be able to use them outside of the college. There are so many free tools out there and obviously, now we are aware of them, we are more likely to advertise to our learners that there are other tools they are able to use.'

A staff development day about Assistive Learning Technologies was held at the end of the summer term when Nina was able to share the range of accessibility tools introduced within the ACER workshop and through her engagement with the Learning Futures webinar session. During the day practitioners explored some of the digital technologies available and produced a mind map of ideas for useful e-learning tools to be included in an induction pack for associate lecturers.

5. Next Steps

Moodle

Use of the VLE and development of e-learning has been included as a cross-college objective for all staff members. The college Moodle will continue to be adapted for each different faculty so that there is specific material relating directly to the programme.

The college intends to continue to expand the Functional Skills Moodle and to encourage Functional Skills tutors to use it with their students. Austyn's role has changed as he is now part of the HE delivery team for engineering. However, his replacement will continue to work with and develop the Moodle site. Nadine will continue to support tutors to develop resources for the Moodle site.

Expansion of Assistive Technologies

As a result of the staff development day a new Associate Induction programme has been put together which includes a presentation about assistive technologies and accessibility tools. Initially staff members will be introduced to two or three tools to start using and then every two or three months an update is to take place where new tools will be introduced. Nina explains –
'Every couple of months they will use two or three, get familiarised with them, if they are happy then we can move on to the next. We don't want to bombard them with information, just given them enough and then move on.'

Piloting an E-Package for Functional Skills

During 2015 several national awarding organisations like City and Guilds and OCR have produced their own materials to support a blended learning approach to Functional Skills and Nina has been given a new role in charge of the 'e-project' which involves piloting one of these online packages. Nina has been working closely with the trainer involved and has shared the Padlets and other resources she has created during the Learning Futures project –
'I think that we will be using these resources as additional resources for our e-package.'

6. Project website

A multi-media version of this case study is available on the ACER project website. It contains:

- clips from audio interviews with the staff from Bedford College who took part in the project;
- a selection of the digital resources they created;
- links to all the e learning tools they used;
- short instructional videos on how to use the tools.

To visit the case study on the project website click this link - http://tinyurl.com/o599y8h

If you would like to contact the staff from Bedford College who were involved in the Learning Futures project, please e mail the project manager, Mark Barnsley - mark.barnsley@acer.ac.uk

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