Case study

Association of Colleges in Eastern Region (ACER)

Digital Approaches to English and Maths

- using technology to support learners on traineeships and apprenticeships
- Cambridgeshire County Council Adult Learning and Skills

PROJECT LEAD

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Regional Projects Manager

1. About the Provider

Cambridge Adult Learning and Skills offer leisure and vocational courses over the five districts of the county of Cambridge in both urban and outreach settings with an average of 12,000+ learners each year. Their provision is based in local venues such as libraries, village halls and community colleges and contains a varied programme of English and maths support including an extensive family learning programme, ESOL courses and provision for adults with learning difficulties. The service works in close partnership with employers and a range of community organisations and at the start of the Learning Futures project was contracted to deliver Functional English and Maths programmes to candidates on Level 2 and 3 Health and Social Care apprenticeships.

2. The Challenge

About The Practitioners

At the start of the project Lisette Veit held responsibility for the Curriculum Development and Support at Cambridgeshire ALS and was the Co-ordinator for the Learning Futures project. She managed the Functional Skills team who supported the eighteen assessors involved in the delivery of the apprenticeship programme.

Simon May is an additional learning support tutor and has worked with Lisette to support the assessor team in developing their IT skills and to develop English and maths resources for use with Health & Social Care apprentices.

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Naomh Campbell is a Curriculum Manager with extensive Functional Skills experience. When based in a Learndirect Centre, Naomh had worked on an earlier ETF-funded project, the Traineeship Staff Support Programme, developing contextualised resources for use in offering English and maths support to Customer Service trainees.

Rebecca Morgan (Business Services Manager); Lyndsey Heyward-Smith (Service Director) supported the team at a strategic level. Lisette has invited a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership to work with them.

The Challenge

As was the case with most other providers in the ACER project, Lisette and her team of assessors and Functional Skills tutors faced the challenge of trying to engage workplace learners in valuing the Functional Skills support and qualifications that were an integral part of their apprenticeships. The team were aware that often candidates might not immediately see the relevance of such skills and qualifications. Assessors were concerned too that with limited time on their workplace visits they needed to develop or find English and maths materials on the web that candidates could complete between those meetings. For this reason Lisette was also keen to explore the use of video conferencing.as a way to increase the level of contact between assessors and their candidates in a cost effective way.

Through her earlier work on the Traineeship Staff Support Programme project when she had piloted an online ILP, Lisette was aware of various challenges in developing her tutors' skills and confidence in the use of digital technology. She was aware that her assessor team still lacked in experience

of using the OneFile e-portfolio system and given the rural locations of many employers internet access could very variable. However, Lisette was keen to introduce her assessors and her Functional Skills tutors to the benefits of using Edmodo as a virtual learning environment as she had used it very successfully as the platform for the blended learning element of a Level 3 Award in Teaching English programme she had delivered earlier in the year.

As the service was challenged to make efficiency savings of up to 40%, Lisette was hopeful too that the opportunity to explore the use of digital technology more fully would provide insights and resources that she could then share with other managers in the service as a blended learning model could be one way of making some of the necessary cost reductions within their provision.

3. The Solution

At a key point in the project the original focus on Health and Social Care apprenticeships had to be reduced as a result of three factors: contractual changes to programme delivery; long term staff sickness and some key staff changes following an organisational restructure within the County Council. These changes meant that Lisette and her team were no longer able to work directly with apprentices and so decided to focus much more fully on staff development activities in the use of e-learning approaches and on exploring new ways of integrating digital technology into workplace practices.

Developing the use of Edmodo with learners and tutors

Lisette and her team have been successful in promoting the use of Edmodo as a VLE for use with both Functional Skills learners and tutors undertaking in

house staff development. They set up an Edmodo site as the blended learning platform for the delivery of the L3 Award in Teaching Mathematics programme that eighteen Cambs ALS staff went on to successfully complete this year. The A Level maths content of the L3 Award was quite challenging for some staff on the course and so the opportunity to share calculation strategies and receive encouragement from colleagues by posting messages and resources on the Edmodo forum was a frequently used feature!

Lisette also set up an Edmodo site as a professional networking tool and discussion forum for English and Maths teachers in Cambridgeshire and during the project the membership has risen to 66. As part of a CPD workshop for Cambs ALS staff Elaine and Lisette promoted the use of Edmodo and gave a brief introduction to its various features.

Promoting digital technology with Cambs ALS managers

As part of a strategy to raise awareness of the potential benefits of using digital technology within the service a workshop was organised for middle managers at Cambridge ALS entitled 'SMARTer Collaboration'. The session set out to introduce a variety of Useful Tools that both managers and tutors could use in their different job roles. Elaine and Lisette who ran the session created a Padlet board containing links to a range of multi-media tools and resources that they demonstrated.

The tools explored in the workshop included:

- Padlet
- Prezi
- online whiteboards like Scribblar and WhizIQ

- cloud storage and collaborative working tools like Microsoft OneNote, Google Drive and Dropbox
- video conferencing packages like Skype and Appear.in
- Edmodo
- screencasting software like Screencast-o-matic and Jing

Managers were invited to engage in a variety of group activities which involved using online tools for communication and collaboration. During the session Lisette and Elaine offered a set of links and screencasts that participants could use in completing the activities but which they could also access afterwards.

Leading by example

Throughout the ACER project when working with colleagues in day to day meetings, Naomh, Lisette and colleagues were keen to model the use of digital technology. For example, in planning and running a standardisation meeting about the Speaking and Listening requirements for Functional English assessments the team used a range of digital resources and collaborative learning tools which they then shared with colleagues as a Blendspace module. In this way the content was presented in an engaging format and was made available as a blended learning module for other colleagues. It also served as a practical example of how digital technology can be used to improve working practices.

The module features the use of:

- Prezi
- Powtooon
- Quizlet

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- Powerpoint
- Surveymonkey
- Youtube.

Promoting video conferencing with employers

Having successfully completed the first MacTrac modules about video conferencing, the project team were keen to share their knowledge and skills with local employers and a workshop was set up for seven staff from South Cambridge Advice Network (SCAN). The workshop aimed to introduce some free video conferencing software like Skype and to explore its potential use by advice staff.

Developing digital resources for the Care sector

Whilst no longer involved in the provision of Health and Social Care apprenticeships Cambs ALS continued to have very active involvement in local networks of care providers and began to explore the viability of offering contextualised e-learning resources for English and maths on other workplace support programmes. They consulted a range of employers like Midas Care Ltd and piloted some early draft resources which have served to identify the key content and format of learning materials that they would value. In summary, employers felt that speaking and listening skills were a key priority for workplace efficiency, much more important than maths skills. Writing skills for tasks such as care notes and incident reports were important but employers wanted staff who could write clearly and with an awareness of audience and purpose rather than technical accuracy. They also felt that some of the metalanguage of Functional Skills can be off putting to workplace learners who require materials that are directly relevant to their workplace tasks.

4. Reflections

Senior and middle managers

In reflecting on the overall impact of the project Lisette feels that the staff development activities within the ACER project have already led to some key changes within the organisation –

'Internal professional development has led to a strand in our quality improvement strategy focusing on innovation. Digital technology is a major component of the innovation theme. Training in digital technology tools and their use has impacted managers, teaching staff and learners positively, and will continue to do so as skills are cascaded throughout the organisation and to our partners.'

She feels that whilst the project team had to adapt their original action plan, the increased focus on internal staff development was very beneficial and the involvement of senior and middle managers has resulted in important organisational and policy changes –

'Senior managers, including our Head of Service Lynsi Hayward-Smith, have been actively involved in the digital good practice project throughout. They have taken part in the CPD provided by MacTrac and found it thought provoking and useful. Quality Improvement policies have been influenced by the project, and aspects of digital technology have been used to help the transition from a service with multiple, separate strands of work to an integrated service arranged by geographic area.'

The workshop session for middle managers showcased a wide range of digital tools that could be used flexibly by managers as well as tutors. Whilst the use

of Skype as a video conferencing tool by staff is limited by County Council restrictions on downloaded applications, Lisette feels that the opportunity to explore other tools was valuable in prompting managers to consider the benefits and cost savings of in house online collaboration.

5. Use of Edmodo as a VLE

Lisette is keen to support her colleagues in developing their skills and confidence in using Edmodo to offer staff development programmes as well as a web-based platform to share English and maths resources with learners -

'We use Edmodo as a professional networking tool where we share information about tools and resources; this group currently has 66 members, and membership increased as a direct result of this project.'

As a result of their involvement in the ACER project Lisette feels that the course team became more confident in managing the technical aspects of offering their L3 Award in Maths programme through blended learning –

'The digital content of the Level 3 course and the flipped method of learning used were enhanced by skills learned during the course of this project.'

'There is a double benefit to this in that the participants are all teachers who will use their enhanced digital approach with learners in several different institutions.'

At the same time the Level 3 course team were aware that blended learning programmes can be very challenging for learners. There is the technical challenge of becoming familiar with lay out of an unfamiliar website and with a reduced level of face to face contact with other learners; some participants may

feel isolated if they do not feel comfortable in engaging with the online forum. These aspects may be particularly significant if the course content is itself challenging.

6. Modelling and sharing good practice

In addition to the workshop sessions that the project team have run to update managers and tutors, they have also tried to model good practice in using digital technology themselves in their day to day engagement with other staff and learners. In this way their colleagues have seen them use a wide range of e-learning tools such as:

- Padlet
- Prezi
- Powtoon
- Surveymonkey
- Youtube
- Quizlet
- Blendspace
- Scribblar and WizIQ
- Appear.in

The blended learning resource on Standardisation created by the project team used several of these tools and is an example of how they can be combined effectively to develop an engaging, multi media module.

'Assessors and tutors have shared stories about their use of tools, for example, Padlet, and the positive response they received from learners'

7. Working with Employers

Whilst the project team's involvement in the delivery of Health and Social Care apprenticeships was curtailed, Lisette feels that her ongoing contact with employers in the care sector has been valuable and has enabled the service to approach the Care sector more effectively in terms of the content and the format of the open learning resources in English and maths that they are continuing to develop –

'Working directly with employers has been illuminating in discovering information about their priorities in terms of the English and maths skills of their employees as well as in their approaches to staff development.'

For Lisette, running the workshop on video conferencing for local employers provided valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of using digital technology in workplace settings and enabled employers to share their varied experiences of using different packages. Whilst there was a level of anxiety about confidentiality issues, access to equipment and the technical challenges, participants' comments included –

'It can be very helpful, eliminating the need to travel long distances.'

'Used Google Hangouts with four in a call. Option to record a meeting is good as you can edit it for use as a summary.'

8. Next Steps

Before becoming engaged in the Learning Futures project, previous CPD events had encouraged tutors to 'innovate' but sometimes failed to include examples of effective practice that were relevant to staff working in the adult

learning and skills service. Lisette feels that the experience of being part of the project, attending the workshops and webinars, trying out new e-learning tools, has provided a range of practical examples of how digital technology can be used not only in English and maths teaching but also in improving collaborative and more efficient working within the service -.

'Quality Improvement policies have been influenced by the Learning Futures project, and aspects of digital technology have been used to help the transition from a service with multiple, separate strands of work to an integrated service arranged by geographic area.'

Through their involvement in the project Lisette and her team have explored some key e-learning tools that have been popular with tutors and learners and which they intend to continue to use in developing resources and in working with learners in the classroom. These tools include:

- Padlet
- Edmodo
- Screencast-o-matic
- Skype
- Powtoon
- Quizlet

In summary, Lisette feels that whilst the project coincided with a time of organisational review and restructure which impacted on its original targets and methodology, there have been valuable opportunities to raise the profile of digital technology in terms of its benefits for tutors and senior managers alike –

'Digital approaches to innovation and good practice, collaboration, innovation, partnership management and performance management are now integral to the quality improvement strategy of the service.'

9. 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 Cambridgeshire Adult Learning and Skills 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/nl5g4w4

If you would like to contact the Cambridgeshire Adult Learning and Skills staff involved in the Learning Futures project, please e mail the project manager, Mark Barnsley - mark.barnsley@acer.ac.uk

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