

JISC RSC Scotland South & West Case Study @ Stow College

National Online Trade Union Courses at Stow College

This case study gives an overview of a successful national online suite of Trade Union (TU) courses which Stow College have been developing and delivering since 1999. It highlights what factors have influenced decisions in designing successful online learning courses aimed at learners with a range of IT skills; and which have successfully increased student retention on the courses (over 200 students have completed the 13 introductory courses in the last 12 months). It highlights the successful implementation of an introductory e-Learning course which has a positive impact on student retention and achievement rates.

About Stow College

Stow College is a further and higher education college with over 75 years experience of delivering high quality education programmes to learners. The College opened in 1934 delivering skills training, mainly to those employed in traditional engineering industries. Over the years the curriculum has consistently developed to match the needs of learners and to align with national priorities.

More recently, a strategic decision was taken to engage fully with the widening access and social inclusion agenda. Currently 40% of the full-time students come from the 5% most deprived postcode areas.

61% of learners have no formal qualifications on entry, and 98% of full-time students gain employment or progress to more advanced education or training. The College still retains a significant interest in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) agenda and regularly presents internationally on developments in this area. In addition, strong articulation arrangements with local universities exist for learners to continue their studies at a more advanced level.

The Challenge

The Trade Union Education department first became involved in online learning in 1999 in response to national initiatives to increase access to training for TU (Trade Union) representatives and for learners to have greater flexibility about where they studied.

In 2002 there was the opportunity to expand online provision to develop courses to be delivered nationally. The department was able to bring this past experience together with the improved technological facilities available to inform and implement their current online strategy.

There were a number of key decisions:

- All courses would be available as online courses. These courses are delivered nationally and therefore it wasn't feasible to establish campus-based tutorials, which some learners would not be able to access.
- Courses would be designed from the learners' perspective and the technology was secondary.
- A standard course template would be developed and used for all online courses.
- All departmental staff would be involved and staff development was key to success.
- Courses would be delivered using the college's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
- There would be a helpdesk for technical queries.

In designing courses from the learners' perspective it was recognised that the department provides for a fairly homogeneous market. TU representatives require access to information, working practices and the skills to apply these in their own working contexts. Their role also requires the development of communication, negotiating, research and personal effectiveness skills. This requires a high level of learning and understanding as well as the requirement to collaborate with others to carry out their role.

These courses are delivered fully online to students from a range of backgrounds with very different IT skills. But differences in technical abilities meant that whilst some learners struggled, other learners with good technical knowledge were held back. As a result the various mechanisms for collaboration such as explanations, sharing answers, negotiating an answer and peer encouragement were not present.

Collaboration is essential in trade union studies. Whilst tutors assist learners understanding rules and regulations, their implementation in the work place and strategies to solve problems is best learned in collaboration with other TU representatives. It was therefore important to ensure that all learners were able to use these interactive tools before collaborative tasks were set.

Another important factor was the structure of the course and that collaborative tasks should be an integral element in the course; based on a constructivist approach which enables learners to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge.

The final challenge was that retention and achievement rates for online courses tends to be low when compared to face to face delivery or even blended delivery models and therefore there was a need to focus on supporting and engaging students to encourage course progression and completion.

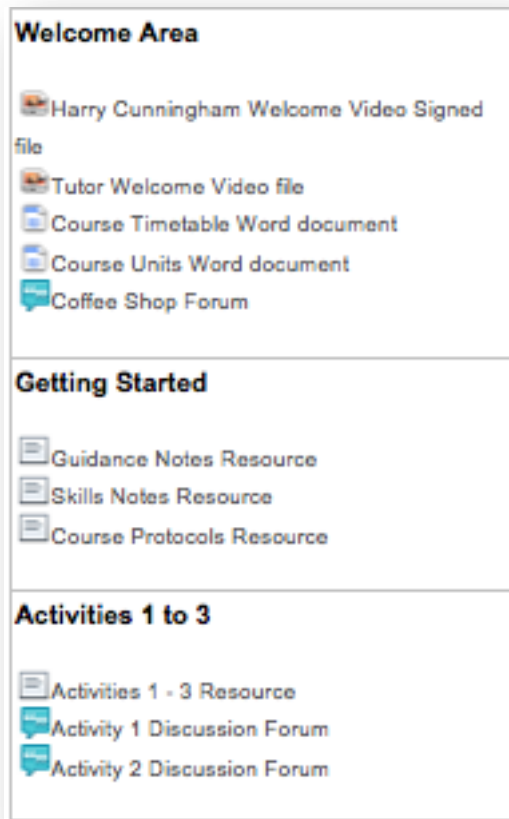
The Activity

Prior to starting any TU online courses, participants have to complete the GREL course (Get Ready for E-learning). This is a 5-week course (Introduction to Learning on the Internet) accredited through the National Open College Network.

Following the introduction of this course, retention and achievement have significantly improved. Over the years there have been a number of developments, including a welcome video for each course. In addition to video and sound, this is also delivered in sign language. Learners will not meet their tutors and therefore this helps to create a more personal approach.

Tutors are currently developing interactive learning chunks using Adobe Captivate to create more personalised learning.

All courses follow the same format and there are guidance documents for tutors to help ensure consistency across all the courses.



For each lesson in the course the structure followed a set format of:

- Overview
- Tasks
- Resources

Following a set structure helped learners progress through the course and acted as preparation for the TU courses e.g. Health & Safety, Equality Reps, Employment Law.

The Outcomes

From the department's point of view there have been a number of positive outcomes, these include:

- A suite of courses developed using a standard template and approaches
- All staff in the department are expected to participate
- Lead on national TU training
- Improvement in retention and achievement

From Stow College's perspective there are a number of positive approaches which have informed the college's online development strategy. The development has been successful in designing a course template and support strategies which meet the learners' needs and enables collaborative learning. The strategies supporting student retention and staff development can be copied or adapted for other developments.

Comments from learners:

"Enjoyed working on the course and feel I got a lot out of it. Look forward to next part."

"I have enjoyed the course so far and I am looking forward to starting Stage 1 for Safety Reps."

The Impact

Developing an introductory course ensured that all learners had a better understanding of what was involved in studying online and gained experience in contributing to online discussions, uploading documents and using online resources.

The course helped learners gain confidence, but also enabled tutors to target support to learners who experienced difficulties e.g. contributing to online discussions.

Achieving the online induction course was an incentive for learners and prepared them for the TU courses.

Lessons Learnt

It was important to ensure that all learners were able to use the interactive tools and to establish the norms of communication before collaborative tasks are set.

Collaborative tasks should be an integral element in the course. That is, they should be part of the assessment and at an appropriate point in the course.

Useful Links

<http://www.adobe.com/products/captivate/>

<http://www.nocn.org.uk/Homepage>

<http://www.stow.ac.uk/>

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