

PLANNING TO USE E-MAIL TO SUPPORT THE LEARNING PROCESS?

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Last year she examined 'email as a tool to support the learning process', a research project co-sponsored by the Scottish Further Education Unit (<http://www.sfeu.ac.uk>) and the University of the Highlands and Islands (<http://www.uhi.ac.uk>).

In her cross-college role she has more recently been supporting tutors who are undertaking a new course - 'An Introduction to Providing Online Support to Learners', which is part of a European funded project (<http://www.sln.co.uk>).

Summary

This article reports on the outcome of an action-research project using email as a means of providing online learner support. This was the first attempt to engage a small group of full-time learners in the use of Information and Communication technology as a 'value-added' part of their coursework. The outcome from this experience was helpful in determining college policy and procedures for online learning support provision

Introduction

Most further education colleges in Scotland now have a networking infrastructure in place and to a lesser degree are developing and/or offering online learning. It's a bit like the 'Yukon Gold Rush' in that everyone wants to be there to attract their share of the potential learner market - be it at a local or global level. My own college (Glenrothes College of Further Education, Scotland http://www.glenrothes_college.ac.uk), is beginning to dip an organisational toe into online course development by exploring the potential of use of Information and Communication Technology in teaching and learning. Having recently completed a literature research review on the role of Online Tutoring and its implications for the Scottish Further Education community, I would like to share some of the findings and experiences with you. The focus of this article is on an action-research pilot study using email to support the learning process.

Background

The pilot study engaged a small number of mainstream learners in using email as a communication tool to support and enhance their learning. It was anticipated that findings from the pilot study group could be used as indicators to guide best practice for future college projects in determining whether email, as a teaching and learning tool, does indeed enhance learning. The study group had been selected because of the small class size and class time had been apportioned accordingly in that the learners had less direct access to tutor contact time. The pilot group already knew their tutor and each other, but the subject, Politics, was new to them. These learners had the required basic Information Technology skills and two of the group already used email. Participation in this study was optional, although learners were actively encouraged to participate with basic email training available for those who wished to attend.

Differing Perceptions

The tutoring staff were enthusiastic and had high expectations of a positive outcome, but as the results indicated, learners apparently did not share this vision. The low learner participation level clearly indicated that there was a major problem. This may have been due to the learners not being either regular email users or not being expected to use email in any other part of their coursework. One learner, who had been ill, did contact the tutor by email which could suggest that changing priorities affect email usage. Internal technical problems resulted in Internet email addresses being issued. Unfortunately, the Internet email service became unavailable for short period which was frustrating because the use of email communication underpinned this study. However on the positive side, and there always is one if you look hard enough, the learners had not yet participated therefore were unaffected by the lack of email access.

Online interactivity

While enthusiasm for the use of Information and Communication Technology in teaching and learning is commendable, it is not enough to encourage learner participation and promote meaningful learning. Email is a diverse communication tool, which has been used effectively in teaching and learning, but its success depends greatly on how it is implemented.

The task of engaging non-email users into becoming regular email users, lies in the college's learning culture, teaching and learning strategy, staff and learner perceptions and attitudes towards the integration of Information Communication Technology into the curriculum. Our learners had not used email before in any other part of their course work and their non-participation raised questions on learner motivation, interaction and perception of online learning.

The University for the Highlands and Islands is a useful reference document (http://www.uhi.ac.uk/LET_Report.html) which explores how people learn and how to create learning environments which maximise learning potential.

If the online learning activities are embedded into the course design then this will hopefully begin to encourage change in the learning culture and the attitude of learners when using Information and Communication Technology as a learning tool. The lack of recognition through awards/assessment for the online component may have impacted on participation levels as the learners opted against doing additional work which had a null return. The decision to make online activity an optional or mandatory part of course work is dependent on the aims of the course. In this study it was optional since we did not want the learners to be put under unnecessary pressure for the duration of the pilot study. It is essential to prepare tutors and learners with the relevant skills before the programme of study is undertaken, to ensure that the technology is not getting in the way of their subject learning.

Preparing for the Online Environment

Careful and detailed pedagogical planning is the key on which to base the integration of ICT, where appropriate, into the curriculum. This pilot study has not been as successful as anticipated, however it did highlight actions which should be taken to ensure greater success in gaining potential benefits from an effective online learning environment. These can be summarized as:

- improved learner communication, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills;
- promotion of group discussion/activities to assist the learning process;
- promotion of working in teams and learning from others; and
- encourage development of critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Tasks to be addressed before engaging in the use of email for online teaching and learning include the identification and adoption of a college strategy for the implementation of ICT in teaching and learning. The website at Pennsylvania State University presents a report on 'An Emerging Set of Guiding Principles and Practices for the Design and Development of Distance Education' which outlines their approach towards defining 'a supportive institutional culture in which the possibilities of distance education can be realised' (http://www.cde.psu.edu/DE/IDE/guiding_principles/). Learners need to be encouraged to use email for online communication with an underpinning goal of attempting to change learner culture and attitudes in the use of this type of technology. Guidance procedures for profiling learner's suitability to study online assist the tutor in determining what pre-skilling may be necessary. Example checklists are located at (<http://www.onlinelearning.net/ole/holwselfassess.html>) and (<http://www.att.com/learningnetwork/virtualacademy/success4.html>). These documents may prove to be useful starting points for discussion within your own organisation.

Conclusions

Online induction procedures can help to encourage group cohesion and reduce the feeling of isolation by encouraging tutoring staff to use email for personal and professional use which helps to build confidence and competence using this type of technology. Online learners do need clear guidelines such as the minimum number of emails to be sent during one week, acceptable online behaviour and what constitutes an acceptable response for peer critique responses. Through the process of learning from experience, such as this project, and from each other does enable us, as tutors, to develop effective learning environments and enhance the learning. By openly sharing online development and delivery experiences we, as educationalists, begin to develop good practice. The current philosophy of engaging in collaborative projects, team working, learning from doing, learning from experiences - including mistakes - and from each other is what is asked of our learners - why not ask the same of ourselves?