

DEVELOPING SKILLS IN E-LEARNING FOR FURTHER EDUCATION LECTURERS

SARAH CORNELIUS AND CAROLE GORDON

ABSTRACT

Virtual Learning Environments have been adopted in the majority of Scottish Further Education (FE) colleges, however few staff have experience of them and there is still something of a culture change necessary to integrate e-learning into everyday practice (Dailly, 2003). There is a pressing need for training in e-learning as part of professional development programmes and core lecturer training, particularly as it is recognised that teaching staff need to develop confidence with the technology to use it successfully (Harris, *et al.*, 2004).

In April 2005 over 50 lecturers from Scottish FE colleges took part in e-learning workshops as part of the University of Aberdeen's Teaching Qualification (Further Education). These workshops delivered course content and provided first hand experience of e-learning tools. This paper presents findings from the evaluation of these workshops. It highlights the need for further training for FE lecturers and makes suggestions for the further development of e-learning skills for staff in FE.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are integrated software systems that are designed to facilitate course management and encourage student involvement in e-learning (Wikipedia, 2005). They are an increasingly important part of the strategy of many FE Colleges for delivering online and flexible learning. A survey by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) suggested that 82% of surveyed FE colleges used a VLE (JISC, 2003), although evidence also suggests that relatively few are using them with large numbers of students (Ferl, 2005). Numbers of staff involved within Colleges also appears to be relatively small – 50% of Colleges responding to the JISC survey reported less than thirty staff using the VLE (JISC, 2003).

“The fact that as yet there has been little use is not a lack of potential, nor a lack of responsiveness from students – but a lack of skills and resources on behalf of institutions to generate the right kind of materials that build on the potential of the technology, and to integrate them in an appropriate way into a teaching programme.” (SFEU, 2004)

The development of IT and e-learning skills in FE lecturers is a topical issue. There are staff development initiatives underway both within individual colleges and across Scotland. These include an e-learning staff development programme (eMerge) from the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) and JISC Regional Support Centres (SFEU, 2005). It is also expected that occupational standards addressing the use of ICT for teaching and learning will be adopted into forthcoming CPD standards for College Lecturers (Scottish Executive, 2005). Other initiatives to develop e-learning skills in FE staff across the UK include courses such as the LeTTOL (Learning to Teach Online) course at Sheffield College which has been completed by over 2000 people (Sheffield College, 2005).

These courses and initiatives are welcome as it is recognised that the College Lecturer of the future will need to be skilled in computer based learning.

“Knowing how to switch the equipment on will be a sine qua non — and for some FE staff that alone will be a challenge — but it is only the first and simplest stage. College teaching staff will need to be able to understand the

potential of computer-based systems, how computer-based learning materials can be produced, how to work with other types of staff as a team to produce the relevant materials and how to use the systems and the materials to best advantage as part of an overall learning process. As the systems are themselves developing at ever greater speeds, it will also be essential for staff to be adaptable..." (SFEU, 2004)

The need for training is also emphasised by the evidence that many FE students are becoming sophisticated users of technology. There have been many reported successes in using online and mobile technologies, even with those regarded as 'less able' (for example Kingston, 2005). That lecturers are likely to be 'baby boomers' or members of Generation X whilst their students are more likely to be part of the Net Generation, only serves to emphasise the differing experiences with technology that the two groups have (Hartman, *et al.*, 2005).

Mason (quoted in JISC, 2005) suggests that online tutoring is made to seem more difficult than it really is because too much is made of training tutors. She suggests that the key components of learning to tutor online are familiarity with the software and how to get online; comfortableness with the process of interacting online; and knowledge of what the online course requires of the student. The rest is 'commonsense and intelligent transferring of the art and skill of teaching to the online environment. Ultimately there is no substitute for getting online and experiencing a range of ways of interacting online' (Mason, quoted in JISC, 2005)

This paper exemplifies a model for the delivery of an e-learning experience to help raise awareness of the technology and develop confidence in FE lecturers. The experience was delivered as part of the TQ(FE) programme – a nationally recognised programme which attracts participants from all backgrounds and sections of FE, not just those with an interest in ICT. This article evaluates the experience and highlights issues that may be relevant to others planning or implementing staff development programmes in e-learning for FE lecturers.

THE TQ(FE) E-LEARNING WORKSHOPS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

The TQ(FE) is designed for full and part time lecturers employed in Further Education Colleges. At the University of Aberdeen it is delivered in partnership with Colleges that have negotiated arrangements with the School of Education. The programme offers a blend of learning opportunities – distance learning materials, workplace based activities, practical teaching experience, tutorial support, discussion with colleagues, self-evaluation, reflective practice, self-directed study and assessment. The programme includes three taught courses:

- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Learning, Teaching and Evaluation
- Wider Professional Role.

In April 2005 a one-off e-learning workshop was integrated into the final course on the TQ(FE) programme. The aims of this workshop were to deliver content relevant to the Wider Professional Role course, and at the same time promote awareness and raise confidence of lecturers with a selection of techniques used in e-learning. The WebCT VLE was used to deliver the content and provide tools for discussions.

The workshop included:

- a preparatory face to face introduction from a lecturer
- pre-workshop online induction activities for those unfamiliar with WebCT
- a 'time limited' workshop involving use of discussion forums, chat, presentation tools and online testing tools.

The content of the workshop addressed the theme of experiences of team working and what makes an effective team. The activities were designed based on an experimental learning model which underpins the whole of Aberdeen's TQ(FE) programme. The structure of the activities was adapted from an example presented by Hill (2003). This is presented in Table 1. During the workshop the VLE provided an 'agent for socialisation and collaboration' (Berge and Collins, 1995) and by taking a social constructivist approach learners were encouraged to participate, think reflectively and collaborate with one another to facilitate learning (Maor, 2003). As this was the first experience of distance learning using e-learning tools the workshops were presented over a concentrated period of time, so that use of the discussion forums was almost synchronous, and online chat tools could also be employed.

Table 1: The TQ(FE) e-learning workshop

Stage in the experiential learning cycle	E-learning activity	Technology used
reflective observation	learners contribute an example of their own experiences of team working to an online discussion	Discussion forums
abstract conceptualisation	after reading the contributions to the discussion, each learner identifies important factors for team working	Discussion forums
active experimentation	each learner prepares a list of key factors for team working and presents these to the online discussion	Discussion forums
concrete experience	learners view a PowerPoint presentation on the topic of effective team working	Online PowerPoint presentation with audio
reflective observation	during a chat session learners reflect on the presentation and their own ideas of factors that encourage effective team working	Chat
evaluation	learners complete an evaluation questionnaire	WebCT quiz tool

The workshop was implemented with 5 TQ(FE) groups from 8 different Scottish FE colleges. Five tutors were involved in facilitating workshops, themselves with varying levels of online tutoring experience from beginner to expert. Tutors worked in pairs from their offices in Aberdeen with one acting as moderator and the second dealing with technical or other 'off-topic' issues that arose on the day. Students could be working from home, their office or a college computer room.

EVALUATING THE TQ(FE) E-LEARNING WORKSHOPS

Evaluation of the workshop has been undertaken in a number of ways. Forty eight participants from 4 of the groups completed online evaluation questionnaires immediately after their workshops to provide an insight into lecturers' perceptions of the workshop. Added to this are reflective comments received from tutors facilitating

the workshop, and from college tutors supporting the learners in their local college environments. The fifth group are not included in the evaluation since technical issues meant that the activities had to be adapted slightly for them, so their responses would reflect their slightly different experience.

The questions addressed by the evaluation included:

- prior experiences of e-learning technology
- the effectiveness of the e-workshop in delivering course content
- the effectiveness of the e-workshop in providing an e-learning experience
- support needs
- future plans for using e-learning.

The evaluation questionnaire was administered using the WebCT quiz tool. This included a combination of closed and open questions and was completed anonymously. Participants were prompted to complete the questionnaire immediately after the online session, and as a result a high response rate was obtained. Forty nine questionnaires were returned, although one was uncompleted. Thus a response rate of 98% was achieved.

Additional informal comments from tutors from the University and the FE Colleges involved have also been taken into consideration, and used to help validate the findings. Literature sources have also been used to help to contextualize the findings.

The results and specific issues raised by the participants are discussed here in the context of Salmon's model of e-moderation (Salmon, 2002).

EVALUATION OF THE E-LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS

Salmon (2002) provides a model of e-moderation that has been widely employed for the design and development of e-learning. This model involves 5 stages (adapted from Salmon, 2002):

- **Stage 1: Access and motivation.** During this stage learners are engaged with setting up and accessing the system. The moderator should be welcoming learners and encouraging their participation.
- **Stage 2: Online socialization.** Learners begin to send and receive messages and moderators should be helping them to familiarize themselves with this.
- **Stage 3: Information exchange.** Searching for and sharing information is a characteristic of this stage. Moderators can help by setting and facilitating appropriate tasks and supporting the use of learning materials.
- **Stage 4: Knowledge construction.** At this stage learners work together, reading and responding to messages in conferences to help generate new knowledge. The moderator plays a key role in facilitating this process.
- **Stage 5: Development.** Learners should now become responsible for their own learning and need little tutor support.

Whilst this model is more often applied to longer term e-learning events, it offers a useful framework within which to structure comments received from participants and tutors during the evaluation of the TQ(FE) e-learning workshop.

Stage 1 – Access and motivation

The issues of gaining access and motivating learners to spend time on the e-learning experience were addressed in advance of the workshops. At a face to face meeting

the aims of the workshop were explained to participants, and instructions on how to access WebCT were provided. Participants were encouraged to log in, in advance of the workshop, to check technical issues.

In the evaluation participants were asked about their prior e-learning experiences – 17% had had no prior experience of e-learning and a further 31% minimal experience. 35% had never used WebCT before the workshop, and 23% had used it only for the induction activities provided. Thus, simply logging on to WebCT was a new experience for many.

Despite the provision of induction activities to encourage learners to log on and become familiar with the tools they would be using, technical difficulties were still faced at the beginning of the workshop. A small percentage (8%) had problems with logging in to the system. Others had difficulty finding the chat tool (10%) or navigating around the system (15%). Forty percent of the participants used peer support to help them overcome technical difficulties – a high figure which reflects the fact that many participants chose to work in small groups, or on groups of co-located PCs, for the workshop.

Access problems were not restricted to the participants. On arrival at work to facilitate the first of the workshops the tutors were met by a power cut! Rapid re-deployment to another part of the University several miles away where power was still available was necessary.

Stage 2 – online socialisation

In this instance online ‘socialisation’ was not strictly necessary as all participants were already known to each other. However, an element of informal discussion was important at the beginning of the workshop to help familiarize participants with their environment and to motivate them to begin sending and reading messages and working as an online group. Norms of behaviour, such as the appropriate place to post messages, and informal rules, such as the use of a detailed timetable to guide the event, were introduced by tutors at this stage.

Stage 3 – Information exchange

Online induction activities ensured that the first two stages of development were completed quickly on the day of the workshop. Information exchange involved individual preparation and posting of lists of factors for other learners to view. Participants clearly valued this stage, offering some comments on their peers’ contributions.

Tutors facilitated the exchange of information by encouraging contributions and summarising postings. Information was also provided to help generate the discussion – most notably in the form of a short PowerPoint presentation.

Stage 4 – Knowledge construction

Collation of lists of key points, and the subsequent synthesis of up to twenty lists of factors influencing team working into a single list, reflects Salmon’s ideas of knowledge construction. The opportunity for everyone to contribute and the open nature of communications permitted by the use of the technology was acknowledged – 14% of respondents highlighted this as the best thing about the workshop. Comments received reflect this:

“we worked together and everybody put their points across.”

“interesting reading peoples opinions and seeing that we do have the same concerns.”

Stage 5 – Development

Reflection on the content and the process that learners had undertaken, discussion in the chat sessions and recording of comment on quiz forms assisted the development stage. In chat sessions some learners were seen to be very supportive, offering constructive comments on the ideas of others and developing their own thinking. Other students clearly found this stage too difficult to address and their messages tended to be concise and often off-topic.

The chat sessions and free flow of ideas appealed to some of the participants:

“I can see the real benefits of this, collaboration, sharing ideas, peer support.”

However, others found it difficult to follow:

“the only area that I found difficult to follow was the chat room, always avoided them in the past for the same reason it is difficult to follow the dialogue with so many people chatting.”

And despite some good reflections and useful comments in some groups, in others off-topic chat tended to predominate and one student commented:

“What was highlighted was that educated, alleged disciplined students with a high level of maturity could still be distracted by the ability to send messages to each other. I am now made doubtful that with 18–21 males this type of learning will be successful.”

IMPLEMENTING AND DEVELOPING E-LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR TQ(FE)

Overall, 78% of respondents felt that the workshop was effective in helping them to explore the issues of effective team working and 54% found the activities interesting or very interesting. 93% felt that they had had a useful e-learning experience. A quarter (26%) felt that the workshop was too long.

The best things about the workshop for many were the free exchange of ideas and the new experience:

“it was a new experience for me and I enjoyed it.”

“it got everyone involved and we talked more openly than we would have face to face.”

“I have gained some valuable evaluation on the effectiveness of e-learning and will put this into practise with my future teaching.”

Forty five percent of the participants had never used e-learning before with their own students, and a further 23% only rarely. However, after the workshop 52% said that they would consider using e-learning.

The benefits of using such an approach with their own students were readily recognised by some lecturers. They advocated the use of such techniques for open and distance learning students and others such as evening class students or those who might not be able to access the college physically. They also recognised the way in which it allowed students to participate and contribute in a different way, and the value this might have for learners. However, they also highlighted some of the problems of getting such an experience up and running – specifically preparation time, the need for further training and lack of knowledge about how to adapt their current lessons to an online format. Technical issues such as access to PCs (for both lecturers and students) and reliability of systems were also raised:

“[computers] are like gold nuggets in our department.”

To tutors it was evident that many participants gained confidence as the session

progressed. Initial nervous ‘am I in the right place?’ postings in the discussions forums developed for some participants into thoughtful and useful contributions to later chat sessions. Some of the participants recognised that their own confidence had grown:

“I think we were a bit apprehensive at first but have found the session has brought us more together as a group.”

“At the beginning I felt under pressure to keep up, however, as I got up to speed and gained confidence I went from strength to strength.”

Respondents made specific suggestions for the inclusion of e-learning activities on the TQ(FE) programme:

“I think e-learning could be an integral part of the TQ(FE).”

“I think e-learning should be used more frequently as part of the TQ(FE). I found it rewarding, inspirational and convenient.”

“introduce this in each of the three units.”

“I would like to see the discussion board and chat forum accessible from the start of a TQ(FE) course so people can help each other with course work.”

Convenience was an important factor – the ability to work from home and avoid travel was cited as an advantage of this approach by 10% of participants, and some valued the space to think that working alone afforded:

“I find I gain very little from group work but this did have the advantage of giving me peace and space to concentrate on the activities. I don’t get this in the classroom.”

“Made me laugh and gave me a voice. Often quiet in class and wait for a space to talk. You don’t have to do that on elearning as everyone can speak at the same time and compose their thoughts.”

For others the style of learning didn’t suit their preferences:

“e-learning is still quite limited. When studying I need paper, postits etc. – flicking back and forward between different screens doesn’t work for me.”

“useful experience but still prefer the face to face element of the course.”

“interesting process but content learned away from elearning was minimal, but worth repeating next year.”

It was also clear that for some of the participants, the presence of others and support services was important.

“For the first time it was good to be with others.”

“I would probably have been lost if xx hadn’t been able to help me.”

This was echoed by comments from college tutors who suggested that the workshop would not have been so successful had local support not been immediately available.

CONCLUSIONS

The TQ(FE) pilot workshop was not intended to give a full introduction to e-learning, but a taster so that lecturers could develop confidence with the tools and increase their awareness of what was possible. In these aims it appears to have succeeded, and may have encouraged some lecturers to investigate e-learning further. However, lecturers themselves see considerable barriers to the adoption of e-learning, not least of which are issues of time and further training. For this first exposure to e-learning

they valued the support of their peers, and working in small groups was effective for many. Further support could have been provided and may have avoided some of the technical problems experienced.

As a result of the evaluation of the TQ(FE) e-learning workshop it is possible to highlight a number of issues that may be useful to others planning or implementing e-learning within professional development programmes for FE lecturers.

- The integration of e-learning activities into programmes such TQ(FE) may help e-learning to reach a wider range of FE lecturers than specially developed staff development events.
- Confidence and awareness raising are key to the development of e-learning skills in FE lecturers. Many have no prior experience of e-learning and need encouragement to get started.
- Without adequate resources for staff development (e.g. sufficient computing resources in locations where staff can access them and time for further training) it will be difficult to ensure that a wide range of staff become competent with e-learning, or that they develop resources to use with their own students.
- The support of other learners and technical experts was particularly valued by participants in this study.
- Activities which involve group work may be a good starting point as many lecturers are more willing to experiment together. Working together also provides welcome opportunities for peer support.

The lasting effects of the e-learning workshop which is the subject of this paper are difficult to predict, and some interesting questions remain. In particular, enthusiasm for trying out e-learning with students was expressed, and it will be interesting to re-survey the participants to find out the long term effects of the training. In six months will they have progressed with their explorations of e-learning? How many of them will actually make the move to trying out the techniques demonstrated with their own students? And what barriers prevent them from achieving their stated ambitions?

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