Colchester Institute: Revolutionising staff development with online courses

Summary

Before April 2013 Kathy Chilvers and her Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) team carried out traditional face-to-face staff development sessions. However they had found that there had been a notable decrease in numbers as staff were unable to attend due to various reasons.

Kathy started looking at different ways of disseminating information to staff, and decided to take the sessions online. As a result, teaching staff have been taught how to use a variety of ILT tools and resources, which have helped them to improve and diversify their teaching as well as engage learners.

The Colchester Institute Moodle
About Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute is a major provider of further education and training for North Essex and adjoining areas. The college also provides a range of higher education (degree level) courses. Colchester Institute specialises in the provision of vocational education and training opportunities, including courses in music and performing arts, construction and engineering, health and care, hospitality and food as well as business and management. The college operates from campuses in Colchester, Braintree and Clacton.

The challenge

“Before April 2013 there had been a very noticeable decrease in the number of teaching staff attending Moodle training and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) sessions. Feedback showed that the major factor for staff was lack of time, mostly due to administration and teaching needs.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

Previously, Kathy and her team had put on face-to-face courses through staff development on a number of ILT related subjects, such as open source web tools, social media, cloud computing, and free interactive web resources.

People were not booking onto them, or they were booking on and cancelling. Other duties became a higher priority, and staff found it difficult to find time to complete development work at the times set for training sessions.

In view of this, the TEL team looked at other methods of disseminating information. They decided to go out to teachers as much as possible instead of staff coming to organised staff development sessions.

At the same time, whilst investigating online tools, it was realised that many of the best free interactive web resources that are available on the internet were not necessarily known to teaching staff.

At this point, the idea of creating a totally online Moodle course covering interactive web resources was conceived.
The Discovering Interactive Web Resources Moodle course

As plans developed it was realised that there would be three separate objectives for this course:

1. To enable teachers, through the availability of quality internet resources, to gain information and new skills to use in their teaching and learning,
2. To inform and motivate teaching staff to reflect on their own use of Moodle with their students by their experience of being a student.
3. To build the TEL team’s skills, knowledge and experience in creating and supporting online/blended learning possibilities using the Moodle platform.

For Kathy, the main motivation for creating the online courses was to help improve teaching and learning.

“The teachers themselves are enthusiastic, and there are a lot of them who want to use these tools. However, due to constraints they couldn’t actually come along. My motivation was that you might not be able to come to me, but I can come out to you, and we can find a way.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

By placing the training online it was felt that it would be much more flexible and accessible for staff to access.

The activity

“There are loads of free interactive resources and tools out there, which I’d sourced in the past. My mantra has always been that resources and tools need to be quick, easy to use, and have to work here in college.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning
A new member of staff was recruited to the team in January 2013. As a result Kathy was no longer restricted by her own busy workload, and was able to give her new colleague a plan, a list of the resources, and ask them to go out and make the courses.

“I knew I wanted the online courses to take place over a number of weeks, for an hour a week, with one or two tasks. I wanted to keep the courses short and achievable, and accessible enough so staff didn’t need to be computer experts to undertake them.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

A great deal of thought was put into the planning of the course to make sure it was accessible and well supported, in order to keep the staff motivated.

As Kathy had run online courses in the past, she had learnt that supporting the learners could be just as important as the quality of the materials.

Over the past year the team have created courses on subjects including:

- Discovering Internet Web Resources
- Make your Moodle More Interactive

Each session began with an introduction, followed by activities. Staff had to undertake one task each week, with an optional second task.

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During week one staff examine poster and image generation sites

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The first online course, Discovering Internet Web Resources began in April 2013, and was structured over 8 weeks:

Week 1: Posters and images
Task 1: Create a motivational poster via Wigflip
Task 2: Create an image of your choice via Imagechef

Week 2: Sticky note walls
Task 1: Create a wall
Task 2: Contribute to teaching ideas discussion

Week 3: Puzzles
Task 1: Create a puzzle
Task 2: Create an anagram

Week 4: Prezi
Task 1: Create a Prezi
Task 2: Contribute opinions to discussion

Week 5: Flashcards and worksheets
Task 1: Complete the quiz
Task 2: Create or find a set of flashcards

Week 6: Mindmaps and polls
Task 1: Create a mindmap
Task 2: Create a poll

Week 7: Glogster and Wordle
Task 1: Create a wordcloud
Task 2: Create a Glog

Week 8: Miscellaneous
Task 1: Option of creating something using the various links or sharing opinion on the selection of resources provided within week eight
The original plan was to have around 10 members of the teaching staff attending per session.

“But, we soon had great demand, and once 20 delegates had signed up, we had to start thinking about changing the format of the course. So we looked at the advantages and disadvantages, and decided to then let everybody on the course.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

Over the past year, learning resources staff, support staff, and staff development managers have taken part.

Kathy didn’t just want to teach staff about certain technologies and resources, but also wanted to give them teaching ideas related to the technologies.

“I’ve attempted to complete a number of MOOCs recently, and there seems to be a great deal of discussion during the courses. With these sessions I wanted there to be a more practical approach.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

Once staff had completed the 8-week course the participants would receive a certificate, and the record of course completion would be entered on their personal record.
A great deal of the support for staff came from the trainer. Once the course was placed online, support became very important, and made a massive difference to retention and achievement.

“I know from completing online courses in the past that it's all down to the support that delegates receive whilst they are completing the courses. You can have the most fantastic courses in the world, but unless you have the support to motivate and back them up, you're not going to get the retention and achievement.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

Kathy and her team promoted the courses by sending out emails directly using a clever marketing ploy to promote the course.

“You have to attract people's attention and be a bit gimmicky, because if not staff won’t read the emails. If you use words in capitals, or put colourful posters up, with “fantastic, special offer”, someone will have a little look. We put a lot of thought into that.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

The outcomes

Over the past year 40 people have completed the online course and received a certificate.

A survey conducted at the completion of the course revealed that:

- 100% of those who responded made use of the resources from the course with students, or within their role;
- 70% felt the level of support/guidance throughout the course was great;
- 80% thought the 1 hour timeslot per week was just about right.
The web resources have been collected in the Xtlearn website

Some of the resources, which staff found useful included:

- Quizlet flash cards
- Prezi
- Voki
- Padlet
- Glogster

“The end result is that we’ve had a number of teachers and other staff who have completed the online courses. We thought that if we could get one more teacher signed up they might cascade the information they’ve acquired to their colleagues. Many of the delegates have also encouraged their colleagues to come along to future sessions as well.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

The team have had members of staff approaching them explaining what they’ve learnt from people who have attended sessions, so there has been a cascade effect of best practice.

Teachers who have attended the online courses have taken ideas from the sessions and created their own lessons using the resources.

Ellie Gamble, an FE Health and Social Care lecturer attended the Discovering Interactive Web Resources course, and has now used many of the resources she
picked up in her own courses. She’s made her Moodle course more interactive by attending the online courses.

Another teacher decided to create and use motivational posters for her classroom walls. She now thinks her classroom is calmer, so there have been some unexpected outcomes from the online course.

Another lecturer who is teaching Change Management has used lots of different resources that she picked up from the online courses as an introduction to her lessons.

“I went into her classroom to help and noticed that she’d put up anagrams of the learning outcomes using the anagram maker that I shared in the online sessions. So whilst the groups were waiting for her to come round they’d be trying to solve the anagrams.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning

For Kathy staff and students have benefited massively from the online courses.

• They’ve had the flexibility and accessibility to work on the courses in the evenings and weekends. As a result they’ve been able to continue development in their own time.

• The students have also benefited greatly, as teachers have been able to bring along some new and different resources and learning and teaching methods to the classroom.

Course participants have given their feedback:

“I think for those of us who are already engaged with using technology in the classroom this is an excellent enhancement of that. The variety of online courses cannot fail to inspire us.”

“This course has been invaluable to both myself and my colleague as we have used many features to help us plan for 2013/14 in the midst of changes going through our department. It’s the only way we are able to improve our knowledge without having to set aside work time, which is not an option for us currently.”

The impact

Although Kathy thinks it is difficult to measure impact at this early stage of the project, she expects the online courses to have a long-term effect on Colchester Institute staff.

“I think the impact will be that the online courses will become a standard, crucial part of our staff development. I am hoping that the impact will also be that staff think about the design of their Moodle courses to improve them and make them more interactive for their students.” Kathy Chilvers, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning
Kathy believes that staff have created a community of technology enhanced learning best practice, as they now go online to share resources and ideas.

The lessons learned

During the project a great deal was learnt, resulting in a number of hints and tips to share.

- Planning is crucial;
- Test the course out as much as possible;
- Make sure the course is simple and easy to use;
- Make the course fun and interesting;
- Get staff engaged by hooking them in in the first place and keep them going;
- Supporting learners is crucial, especially in the first week.

In the future, the course will be modified and run for 6 weeks rather than 8 weeks. The bonus in creating this course in Moodle is that Kathy and her team can now just reuse again and again with little further effort.

Useful links

- Colchester Institute website
- Moodle website
- Xtlearn website

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