Chelmsford College: Animating learners in the workplace

Summary

Chelmsford College’s Learning Centre has created real work experience opportunities for IT students by asking them to create animations to promote their new LIBERTY Library Management System. As a result of the project the students have learnt how to deal with face-to-face client consultations, work to a brief and complete work to deadlines.
About

Chelmsford College is a general Further Education college offering a variety of both vocational and professional courses to more than 4,000 students.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, the college is based across three campuses - Moulsham Street, Princes Road and Lee Stafford Academy.

Their facilities have been redeveloped in recent years and they now boast a brand new Electrical and Engineering block, and a new Art, Design and Media centre.

The challenge

Before the students created the animations, most learners who used the centre were not aware of the services that the Learning Centre could offer.

Traditionally, A-Level, BTEC and Access students would use the Learning Centre regularly, but were often directed to specific books.

However, staff in the Learning Centre wanted to inform less frequent visitors, such as IT or Media students, about everything that the centre could offer them.

Assessment Centre Co-ordinator, Jan Church, explained that before they implemented the animation project the biggest problem facing them was their inability to engage with less frequent visitors.

“We needed to showcase what we were doing. We might give inductions in the first week the learners come in, but it’s information overload for them. We needed to find a way to get information out there that wasn’t necessarily from us, into the areas the learners frequented.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

Because of these challenges, Jan was motivated to engage more of these learners with the Learning Centre, the LIBERTY library management system, and the blended resources available. Resources include:

- Links to Chelmsford TV video archive;
- YouTube clips that are used in classrooms by teaching staff;
- PDFs, Powerpoints and traditional print resources.
Jan then started to think about ways that they could publicise and market what the Learning Centre and the LIBERTY system could do.

She soon realized that she could create real work experience opportunities by asking learners to publicise and market the system.

**The activity**

Jan is embarking on her CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) certification. In October 2012 she read an article in the CILIP magazine about creating a comic strip to inspire youngsters to engage with learning resources and staff, and she was immediately inspired.

“I thought the ‘Library Ninjas’ comic strip was a brilliant idea. I wanted to take it a step further and develop an animation in a similar style without copying their idea. I immediately thought it could be in an Anime/Manga style, as it seemed a very popular topic on the college forums, and I thought it would engage learners.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

Jan contacted the IT teaching team to find out whether they were scheduled to teach any animation units in the future. The Year 2 Level 3 ICT students were due to start an animation unit in January, so the timing was particularly fortunate.

Jan received a response from IT Lecturer, Wendy Davis, who asked her students if they would like volunteer for some work experience.
Two students agreed and after Christmas Jan met them to discuss the library management system and its blended resources, and to outline the brief for the potential animation.

“We thought this would be a perfect opportunity for them to get work experience. They probably would never have considered asking for work experience in the library.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

Jan explained to them how she wanted them to publicise the library and the system to students in a way that was relevant and more engaging to them.

“We wanted the animations to make the library management system look like something that students would want to engage with and enjoy using. We wanted the animation to play across our digital signage, in the reception and refectory areas.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator
The LIBERTY animation is displayed on screens around the college

Jan noted that in the first meeting the two volunteers were excited to be part of the work experience project and had already starting generating ideas about how the animation would work.

After outlining her brief Jan let the learners know that she didn’t want to lead them in a firm direction as she wanted them to have the freedom to be creative.

“So, I just showed them the system and what it did, and asked them: ‘what can you do that’ll get students engaging with it’. I wanted it to be as open as possible for them. We wanted it to be from the students for the students.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

The Animation unit was mapped to the work experience:

- Week 1 - Client agreement - By the end of the first session the students were engaged and on board;
- Week 2 - Storyboard – So Jan could see the idea on paper to make sure that everything in the brief was in place;
- Week 3 - Project Plan – By the third week they had came back with their characters and backgrounds for the animations;
• Week 4 - Three week project – the students identified and set their own targets;

• Week 5 – Test – Students tested linear and interactive elements of their animations;

• Week 6 - Review – Constructive feedback to students.

For assessment in the actual unit the task for the students was to create a moving character, to manipulate it in a certain way, so learners met their brief from a teaching and work experience point of view.

The key was to match their work experience to the outcomes of the unit, so they achieved their qualification and also created a suitable piece of work for their client.

“One of the students created a fabulous animation and he met the brief in every respect, but sadly I was unable to showcase it because of the nature of character stereotyping. He depicted one character as a ‘nerd’ who would use the library and another character who wouldn’t typically use it.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

The animation that was used on the digital signage tells a story. It shows a learner who needs to complete an assignment, and goes into the Learning Centre to find some books. LIBERTY is depicted as a wizard and magically appears to help the learner character find the book and complete their assignment. It went up around the college from March 2013.

“The students came to me every week and treated me as they would a client. I would brief them and they would then go away as if they were freelance designers. They were excited by having deadlines they had to meet. Rather than being paid, their reward in the end would be the publication of their animation.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

Jan’s line manager, Penny Petch was very supportive. She was very enthusiastic to support any initiatives that might inspire learners to visit the Learning Centre, and get them learning transferrable skills.

**The outcomes**

“The end result of the project is that both students created brilliant animations to encourage students to use the LIBERTY library management system. The information conveyed was from the students designed for the students, and was received well by them. From the animation, the students now know that if they need help to find resources and books in the library, they can use LIBERTY or ask the librarians for more information about LIBERTY.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator
The college has benefitted in a number of ways:

- There is now greater knowledge and understanding of the library system for the whole student body as the animation is up on all of the digital screens in the reception areas and refectory;
- There is also a greater understanding of what else library staff do nowadays, including working on systems, and developing resources.

Students have benefitted greatly through:

- Experiencing real life work-based face-to-face consultations;
- Communicating with a client and generating creative ideas on the spot;
- Having to take client contact seriously;
- Working to a strict brief outlined by a client;
- Having to be prompt and organized when attending client briefing meetings;
- Learning how to accept constructive criticism and feedback;
- Working as a team collaboratively sharing ideas and feedback.
“A lot of the IT students are quite competitive and I watched them working on their animations, giving each other peer review and support. They helped each other out with hints and tips.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

Staff such as Jan and Wendy have also benefitted from the project:

- It showed Jan that she could have an idea, develop it, and see it through to completion;
- The success of the project and the work ethic of the two volunteers has given both of them the inspiration to take the project much further;
- For Wendy it benefitted her, as her students are now engaging in work experience;
- Jan has learnt from the learners’ IT skills, as well as their ability to peer assess and review.

“Having a live client for the students encouraged them to make suggestions on developing the animation. They could practice soft skills in communicating ideas and liaising at each milestone of the project. The competition between the students motivated them to create a project that went beyond what was being assessed and stretched them. I was very pleased with what the students achieved.” Wendy Davis, IT lecturer

**The impact**

Although the college hasn’t measured the increase in the numbers of learners accessing the Learning Centre or LIBERTY as a result of the animation, the project has had a massive impact on the staff involved, and students in the IT department.

Wendy was so pleased with the results of the pilot project that she is now planning and mapping the whole of the 2014-15 Year 2 Level 3 ICT Animation unit for around 15 students who will be using the Learning Centre as a client.

They aim to create a whole series of animations that develop upon and improve on what they already have. They hope these animations will talk through all the possibilities of the library management system.

Rather than being one project, it'll be 2-3 individual parts of a whole unit. One will be an interactive map of the LIBERTY system, which will direct students to resources, and there will be an animation to deliver an idea of what else is out there, which may be built into a database.

“The experience engaged the learners who presented a contract of works to be carried out, designs and an end product. This has now led to level 2 IT students having an overarching project with the learning centre as the client.” Wendy Davis, IT Lecturer
The project has broadened the horizons of staff in the Learning Centre regarding how to promote and market the LIBERTY system, the Learning Centre and the services they offer in the future.

It has opened their minds about offering new and diverse work experience opportunities to different departments around the college.

Jan has also used the project towards her CILIP certification, and Wendy has used it towards her Masters degree.

“The impact of the animation, the work of the students in the project, and the future projects that are to be introduced because of this pilot will certainly be felt by students and staff as time progresses. So that has to be celebrated for what the students have achieved in a short space of time: the creation of that opportunity to move forward and progress.” Jan Church, Assessment Centre Co-ordinator

The project has had a great impact on the future learning and career paths of the learners:

• By teaching them transferrable skills and imparting knowledge they can use in the workplace;
• They are now aware that there’s more for them as IT students and future employees than just working in gaming;
• They now know what skills they’ll need in the workplace in the future.

The lessons learned

Jan certainly learnt some valuable lessons during the project and has a number of hints and tips to share with other providers.

• Running a pilot project certainly helped them all as it was beneficial to establish areas that need to be improved for the future full project;
• Encourage the learners to be creative, but also be specific about the outcomes of the project;
• Have more regular meetings to quality check.

Useful links

LIBERTY library system animation

Chelmsford College website
Library Ninjas comic strip

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