Huntingdonshire Regional College: Interactive Information Skills and e-Safety with Xerte

Summary

The Learning Resource Centre at Huntingdonshire Regional College has been delivering Information Skills, e-Safety and Inductions using online tutorials developed with Xerte, the open access e-tutorial building software developed by the University of Nottingham. This has allowed the college to engage learners, develop information and independent learning skills, and improve learner employability and progression prospects.
About

Situated in Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire Regional College offers courses for students of all age groups, starting from 16 years. The college offers Higher Education, Further Education and Apprenticeships. Some of the subjects include Hair and Beauty, Engineering, Business and Administration, as well as Apprenticeships in catering, carpentry, and plumbing.

The challenge

Abigail Cuthbertson, Head of Learning Resources, and her team began delivering Information Skills sessions to learners across FE subjects in 2010. Previous delivery of Information Skills at the college was very limited.

They found that delivering the sessions could be challenging, as some viewed them as an ‘add on’ rather than a core activity that is integral to learning.

“This belief made it difficult for curriculum to prioritise releasing learners for these activities. We realized that the timing within the year was critical to successful delivery: too early and it wouldn’t be seen as relevant, too late and learners would have missed the opportunity to use these skills.” Abigail Cuthbertson, Head of Learning Resources

There was also the difficulty of having adequate and appropriately skilled staff to deliver the sessions. The LRC is quite small but is usually busy with only one qualified librarian.

During the summer of 2011 Abigail decided to survey her learners and staff to establish levels of skill and confidence around Study Skills and Information Skills. The results revealed that learner confidence massively outranked staff assessment of learner ability, see the table below.

![Bar chart]

Learner confidence in compiling references and bibliographies in blue, staff assessment in red.
This highlighted the biggest challenge in delivering Information Skills: engaging students in learning something that they felt they already knew.

At around the same time Abigail was introduced to Xerte e-learning tutorial building software at a Jisc RSC event. After the event she realized that she could create engaging, interactive learning objects.

**The activity**

Xerte was presented at a regional Jisc event in spring 2011. The potential application of Xerte for Information Skills was immediately apparent to Abigail.

Throughout the summer she experimented with Xerte, developing resources for Induction and two Information Skills sessions.

In September 2011 she introduced a short learning object at the end of each LRC Induction to assess learning and to reinforce understanding. This was well received by learners.

![Xerte drag and drop activity for LRC induction](image-url)
From September to November 2011 Abigail and her team delivered Information Skills sessions. These covered valuable information skills sessions including effective web searching, evaluating websites and sources, referencing and bibliographies.

Tutor and learner engagement was good with approximately a quarter of all learners undertaking one or both sessions, including many learners from Access to HE, HE, and Level 3 courses.

In December 2011, Abigail was approached by the Business Technology department, who required work placements for degree level computing students. The students worked to improve the Xerte learning objects under Abigail’s direction throughout the spring of 2012.

“This was useful in terms of giving me space to reflect: we were able to improve differentiation by taking long learning objects and breaking them into smaller pieces. This would allow learners to focus on tackling the parts that are appropriate to them, but with the possibility of stretch and challenge by moving onto the next part.” Abigail Cuthbertson, Head of Learning Resources

Following on from the success of the 2011-12 Information Skills sessions, the Vice Principal for Curriculum Strategy suggested that Abigail and the LRC team could look at delivering qualifications. During the 2012-13 academic year, the team introduced the BCS Level 1 in e-Safety, with new learning objects and an accompanying student workbook.

The funded qualification was delivered through 10 hours of support in the LRC with learners also completing activities outside of class. The 2011-12 Information Skills delivery was later included in this course. This combined course addressed both the Information Skills needs of learners, and national and college concerns around e-safety.

The increased granularity of the Xerte Learning Objects has allowed Abigail and her team to offer bespoke Information Sessions in 2013-14. This has been a good solution for lecturers who feel that the full e-Safety qualification wouldn’t meet their learners’ needs, such as the Access to HE learners.

The project has been delivered mainly by LRC Support Tutors, managed through the LRC Support Tutors’ weekly 1:1 performance management meetings with Abigail and through discussions and reflection in team meetings.

The outcomes

The discovery and creation of Xerte learning objects has resolved many of the challenges Abigail and her team were facing. Xerte has made a massive difference to the delivery of Information Skills, and has benefited the learners enormously.

- The range of activities, including drag and drop, quizzes, hotspots, gap word fill, engage learners;
• The immediate feedback shows learners that they didn’t know as much as they initially thought;
• The online delivery allows for sessions to be facilitated by non-professionally qualified LRC staff;
• The difficulty with timing has been resolved as learners can return to Moodle to review the sessions later in the academic year.
• Xerte caters for different learning styles through the variety of activities, and methods of testing.

Students can use the interactive hotspot facility to find out more about bibliographies

In September 2012 Abigail and her team used an improved learning object at the end of each LRC Induction to assess learning.

• 94.6% of learners felt that their LRC Induction was either quite or very useful;
• 13% said that the Xerte online quiz was the most useful part of the session.

The Curriculum Coordinator for Access to HE has given their feedback on the benefits of the Xerte learning objects.

“I am writing to thank you for the provision of the Xerte independent learning opportunities provided by the LRC for our adult learners this year on our Access courses. These sessions provided our students with a valuable
resource that has helped to improve their confidence and skills in the use of academic skills. Being able to work at their own pace enabled them to build skills in an individualised way and monitor their own progress. Self assessment is an important part of our adult learners’ discipline as they prepare for higher education. These sessions dovetailed well into classroom exercises and they were able to draw on the Xerte sessions to complete work, such as including in-text citations and compiling bibliographies at a suitably academic standard.”

The delivery of the learning objects has raised the profile of e-safety and e-learning within the organisation, which has had a positive impact on learners and staff who have not received delivery of the qualification. This has led to greater awareness of the e-learning and e-safety issues and reflection by teaching staff.

Students have been able to learn about the pros and cons of social networking through Xerte

There have also been less measurable outcomes for learners:

- One group of Beauty students held a self-initiated class discussion on the e-Safety issues surrounding social networking;
- This led to them asking each other’s permission before posting photos of each other on social networks.
Through their engagement with the Xerte learning objects, there have been important benefits for these learners:

- Improved negotiation skills;
- Team work;
- Positive creative problem solving;
- Reflection.

Creative Media Games Development students have given their feedback on a recent Information Skills session structured with Xerte Learning Objects.

“Very helpful and has supported my current research project.”

“Very good, helped me improve my bibliography skills with good interactive learning.”

“Gave me a good insight into the whole topic of bibliographies.”

“Self-learning style worked for me, and I liked that you could revisit when needed.”

The impact

The Information Skills sessions have had an impact on college success rates. In the first year that Abigail and her team provided these sessions (2011-12) the success rate for the Access to HE programmes rose from:

- 66% in 2010-11 to;
- 74.5% in 2011-12.

Those students will continue to benefit from these skills as they progress to HE and throughout their careers.

The e-Safety qualification has had an impact on Uniformed Public Services students as they have used the qualification as a condition for internal progression due to its importance for their subject area.

“The e-Safety qualification reinforced the importance of the dangers associated with online technology with Uniformed Public Services students. Many of the students wish to pursue a policing career in the future and this course highlighted how inappropriate or illegal misuse of information technology could have a detrimental effect on their future job opportunities, particularly if it resulted in a criminal conviction.” Curriculum Coordinator, Uniformed Public Services
Xerte has allowed learners to know more about e-safety through drag and drop activities

The project has had a substantial impact on the college as a whole as Abigail was invited to write the college’s e-learning strategy, which sits within the college’s Teaching and Learning strategy.

Abigail has been asked to share her resources and experiences at events within the FE sector, including a Jisc RSC event at Cambridge Regional College, and the librarianship profession both regionally and nationally, including giving talks at Northampton College and Manchester University.

Abigail has explained that she will continue to use and develop the learning objects for bespoke sessions and is currently developing the resources with Curriculum Directors as part of a cross-college work experience programme.

She is supporting various curriculum areas by incorporating e-Safety and Information Skills into their induction and independent learning activities for 2013, and is also working college-wide to prepare for Safer Internet Day 2014.
The lessons learned

In terms of lessons learnt and tips to others, Abigail would give the following advice:

- Create small learning objects as it allows for differentiation and reuse;
- Ensure that your learning objects complement what is already taking place in your organization;
- Think as a learner throughout your planning, and be very clear about what the learners will get out of this course in terms of employability and skills.

Useful links

- Huntingdonshire Regional College website
- Xerte website

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