Oldham College: Using online courses and e-Assessment

Summary

Oldham College have used on-line learning to offer certificated courses in Internet Safety, Environmental Sustainability, Health and Safety and Personal Finance whilst at the same time freeing up teaching staff and obtaining funding.

About Oldham College

Oldham College offers a range of qualifications in many areas. Students are taught in a real life environment with equipment and surroundings equivalent to those in the workplace. Students benefit from the close partnerships that have been created with local businesses, partners and key industries.

The challenge

Oldham College introduced four different online courses in 2011: Internet Safety, Environmental Sustainability, Health and Safety and Personal Finance. These online courses replaced the non-accredited, one-off, face-to-face sessions that were previously used to teach these subjects. When students enrolled at the College in September they chose one of these four courses to undertake. These online courses were initially introduced for two reasons:

- The first was due to a need on the pastoral side. Roger Clegg, Head of Learning Resources wanted these subjects included in the curriculum and for the work that students did for these subjects to lead to a formal qualification. However, there was no time to deliver this in the 12-15 hours that course tutors had allocated to them per week.

- The second reason was to do with funding. Roger and the College wanted to keep their one-to-one tutorial hours with the students, but that ceased to be funded in the curriculum. They managed to keep the one-to-ones by introducing these online qualifications so that teacher could have a one-to-one with a student while everyone else did online learning in the Learning Resource Centre.
The activity

Roger did an hour’s briefing session about the four different online courses with the course tutors. Previously these subjects were taught via one-off face to face workshops which the course tutors didn’t deliver but still had to track that all the students in their sets had participated. They struggled to find the time for this but now the tracking for all of the online courses is done online. A learner and tutor can see exactly where they are and when they are ready to take the exam which saves the tutors a huge amount of time.

The biggest challenge was registering an entire cohort of students onto their chosen course at the same time. Most of the course tutors wanted their students to start their chosen course in September and for it to be a part of their induction. That meant that there were lots of registrations at an already very busy time of year. The problem was that students enrol at the end of August leaving only a week to register everyone before induction. It is important to have the right administrative teams in place to ensure that they can cope with this extra workload. They also needed to ensure the sessions were placed in the timetable correctly so PCs were available at the same time as the one-to-one tutorials.

The next challenge was, as everyone started their course at the same time, they were all ready to sit their chosen online exam at around the same time. The logistics of this was difficult. Learners are more likely to achieve if they take these exams in Terms 1 and 2 but when they were scheduled in Term 3 learners were concentrating on other exams and courses. Next year the aim will be for all students to have completed in the first two terms.

All the qualifications are delivered online via Moodle and accredited by Ascentis. The learners have to complete the Moodle course and successfully pass a mock test before moving to the online assessment centre to take the formal examination. The Exams Centre organised online booking of final exams, but it was still a big pressure to get everyone through for such a large cohort.

Learners enjoy using Moodle and the online courses:

- They see it as a bit of a challenge to see what score can they get and how quickly can they progress through. It’s a bit of a game, very informal.
- They really liked the flexibility of the learning materials and the fact they could decide which units to do and in which order. They can go into some units in depth and skip others. The resources use language that is appropriate to the learners, are appropriate to what they need and link directly to the online assessments.

The outcomes

Students have benefitted from these new online courses as they now get a qualification for their CV. It is a very flexible course so they can choose when and where to learn.
They can be run and accessed at any time and any place. Initially they were booked into Learning Resource Centres whereas now 70% of learners use the Learning Centres and 30% do it at home.

It isn’t mandatory that every learner takes one of these courses. A few learners don’t choose to do any but the vast majority do proving it is a valuable and enjoyable learning experience. Most learners will choose to do one course; others will go on to do a second.

If a learner misses a session it is really easy to catch up as the materials are available all the time and everyone is getting a standard set of information.

A student, Mohammed Anees explains: “The cyber bullying unit helped me understand what bullying is and how we can stop it. It makes you feel for the victims of bullies.”

The fact that it enables the College to continue the one-to-ones is a bonus as they place a very high regard on them.

**The impact**

A big impact that the online courses have had is that the College have been able to keep the one-to-ones with the students. Without them the learners may not have been retained on their courses due to the following:

- The one-to-ones help students who may be struggling with coursework, at home or financially.
- They help with target setting and keeping learners on board.
- They also highlight issues they may be having in another lesson. It all gets picked up in the one-to-ones.
The four online courses are really useful qualifications for the learners.

- They are gaining knowledge that has always been covered in the pastoral programme but previously the learners didn’t gain a qualification for them.

- They now get the knowledge and the understanding and also have something they can put on their CVs and job applications.

A student, Dean Evans tells us: "It was good. It gave me a qualification in something different to my course and I got a certificate."

The knowledge that the learners leave with has improved since running the courses in this way. Previously it was a 1-2 hour maximum session, whereas students are working on their chosen subject every week now and retaining that information. They are also being individually assessed on it which is a new addition.

Online learning as stand-alone qualifications can have quite low success rates as there is no tutor motivating learners. It is really positive that everyone has taken to them so well. The important thing is getting the right qualification for the right learner, ensuring they are interested in the course and they understand why it is important to them.

Last year the success rate was just over 80%. For an online learning course that is very high. This year the College wants to improve on that. There were one or two areas of the College that were below that benchmark and these tended to be the later starters. What seemed to happen was that learners ran out of time or when they...
got later on into the third term all the priority was on getting them through their main course of study. This year they have started much earlier and the vast majority will complete in Terms 1 and 2.

This year achievement is about 76% at the moment with a large number of students still to go through.

For Internet Safety 93% of learners passed first time which is a quick result for learners coming into college. Within the first 6-10 weeks the learners have a qualification and a certificate to go with it.

Internet Safety has had just over 1200 registrations this year and about 900 passes so success rate are high. The failure rate for the exams is only about 7% so the vast majority of learners are passing first time. This is obviously important in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, but also means that the resources are right.

Overall about 2,500 qualifications are aimed to be completed in the academic year. Student, Thawhida Ferdous explains: "I found it really useful as it was related to my course. Health and Safety is very important when doing practical experiments and the Healthy Living unit was useful in my Biology classes. This would be useful for anyone wanting to learn about the role of health and safety in the workplace or live a healthier lifestyle."

The lessons learned

Roger Clegg tells us: "The implementation of this has to be a whole College approach. You can't just say we will deliver this online via Moodle and use the Learning Resource staff or Tutors to deliver it. It has to be something that you work on together.

Try it out with a cohort mid-term; don't try it with everyone all at once. Pick a group to run a range of qualifications and get feedback. This will check your infrastructure, online assessment centre, administration, learning resources staff and how it all works. Work out at the start exactly what you want to get out of it. Then you can analyse whether it delivers what you wanted.

Make sure your tracking is easily accessible so that a tutor can see who has been attending online and who hasn't. Don't make it an administrative burden. Have good tracking on the final exam results. We track it on Moodle and the exams tracking online. Work closely with the exams team so you know when the results are up to date on the system to make it easy to track progress. Make sure that your management information for exams is transparent."

Useful links

Jisc RSC Northwest
Oldham College
Ascentis
Moodle

Video case study

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