Adult Community Learning Essex (Essex ACL) – Broadening horizons with blended learning – technology toolkit for foreign language tutors

Summary

As part of an LSIS Regional Response Fund project, Essex ACL has created a toolkit which provides training for foreign language tutors in producing digital resources that combine audio, video, text and communication activities. This toolkit is now an integral part of a blended learning language course. As well as developing tutors’ skills in using technology for teaching and learning, the main aim has been to provide an alternative and flexible method of delivery, especially where funding cuts have impacted on the cost of running taught courses.

About Essex ACL

Essex ACL is an award winning training provider offering a wide range of training courses and learning opportunities for adults and businesses across Essex.

Graded outstanding by Ofsted, awarded Beacon status and matrix accredited, Essex ACL offers courses from Beauty Therapy to First Aid, Healthy Living to Languages, Arts and Crafts to Early Years and Computing to Health and Safety. In addition they deliver a variety of apprenticeships and offer a portfolio of statutory training courses aimed at the business community.

The challenge

Body Before funding cuts in 2010-11, Essex ACL were charging learners £3.75 per hour, then suddenly they had to increase fees to £6 for certain levels. They also lost the reduced OAP rate.

As a result, many learners couldn’t afford the rise in fees and could no longer come to classes. As Nola Marshall, Essex ACL Languages Curriculum Manager explained, “We’d been losing funding, especially at intermediate plus levels, which meant we
had to put the fees up. So we looked at how we could reduce the costs to the learners.

Essex ACL realised that they would prefer to have some contact with learners, so decided to look at blended learning.

Nola and her team realised there were learners who were missing lessons and not coming back; “Some people were not able to attend regularly as they were busy at work, or ill. We decided to ask them if they might like to sign up to a blended learning course, which is more flexible.”

The main motivations for rolling out the toolkit included:

• To help retired learners who have lost their OAP fee remission to continue their studies with lower fees;

• To respond to learners’ needs in accessing an affordable and more flexible programme of study;

• To address the drop in enrolments during the 2011/12 academic year; To provide a training programme for tutors to increase their use of technology in teaching and learning.

The activity

Nola Marshall, Essex ACL Languages Curriculum Manager noted, “I like to mix traditional methods of learning with the new, and I’ve been on some fantastic training with RSC Eastern, where we’ve been given some very clear handouts. I’ve also been on other training where there has been a higher expectation of my IT skills, where I’ve struggled. So my idea was to produce some written tutorials, which were easier to understand.”

Essex ACL decided that they would produce a toolkit containing 11 tutorials.

• Blogging with Posterous as a digital repository; Vodcasting with Moviemaker; Videoconferencing with Flashmeeting;

• Finding Creative Commons licensed images using Flickr; Creating slidecasts with Slideshare;

• Using wikis for collaborative learning; Making a podcast with Audacity; Subscribing to content in Google Reader;

• Creating interactive exercises in Hot Potatoes;

• Wordle for creating ‘word clouds’;

• Speakonia for converting text to speech.
After the toolkit had been produced, Nola and her team decided to provide face-to-face training to cascade information to their tutors. They secured the services of Joe Dale, a freelance Languages trainer and IT expert, to run three days of intensive training in June 2011.
The Essex ACL team undertook three days of intensive training to learn about the toolkit

As the project coordinator, Nola was able to complete the tutorials at home and compare with the taught sessions attended as an observer. Nola Marshall, Essex ACL Languages Curriculum Manager explained, “We had to find tutors that were free to attend the course, but as it was June, they had finished most of their classes.”

One of the central motivations behind the creation of the toolkit was that you didn’t need to attend the face-to-face training to be able to use it.

However after Essex ACL received feedback from tutors attending the course, they decided that the first session of each blended learning course should be face-to-face in order to identify learners’ ICT skills and learning preferences, and to support learners.
A quick start guide to blended learning

As Nola Marshall, Essex ACL Languages Curriculum Manager, detailed; “We decided to include a ‘quick start guide’, lesson templates, and a structured planning document to ensure that tutors are designing the blended learning course correctly, and they know who they are targeting.”
Lesson planning document and sample course plan

Once it was created, Essex ACL took a step-by-step approach when implementing the toolkit.

- Piloted the toolkit with tutors from other sectors, such as Numeracy/Science and Construction, and NOCN eSkills for eLearning course;

- Created two blended learning Intermediate language courses: in Spanish and French;

During the six months Nola and her team had to complete the LSIS Regional Response Fund project, they did encounter some obstacles.

- The April-October timespan for the project was problematic as the summer break impacted on the availability of tutors and learners;

- Technical problems - with kit and software updates and changes which delayed course design and delivery;

- Printing costs - so encouraged people to take the CD-ROM.

And although there were a few tutors who were against the idea of distance learning, a majority of the teaching staff took to blended learning.

“There is still a fear of technology for some tutors. They like the contact with their learners, but we have tried to emphasise that blended learning is there to
complement what they do.” Nola Marshall, Essex ACL Languages Curriculum Manager

During the project, Nola and her team were able to get support from Essex ACL e-Learning Manager, Maria Neary and Joe Dale. Nola was also able to learn a great deal about blended learning after completing an MA in Digital Technology, Communication and Education with Manchester University, which was 100 per cent online.

**The outcomes**

Nola Marshall, concluded; “There isn’t an end and a beginning to this project. This will go on and on.”

Nola and her team contacted all of the learners whose classes had closed, and now six of those students have returned and are enjoying the benefits of flexible learning; “People who have work or family commitments, and others who find it difficult to attend because of geographical distance will benefit from a more flexible, personalised and self-directed model of learning.”

Tutors and managers have also benefited greatly from the toolkit and blended learning.

Nola detailed; “We’ve benefited as we have a group of tutors now who’ve done the training and are up for learning more.”

Tutors have given their feedback in regards to the online toolkit:

"Useful tools to use in different contexts."

"I always welcome new opportunities where I can learn more and bring new ideas to the class room."

"Motivational tutor, excellent course, can’t wait to use these new tools".

"It showed me how much can be done to improve the learning experience".

**The impact**

Body text goes here Nola and her team are positive about the long-term impact of the toolkit and commented; “We hope enrolment, retention and success rates will improve with the introduction of blended learning.”

Essex ACL is now reviewing the feedback received from tutors and learners and putting it together to refine their delivery.

Feedback from tutors on the training showed:
• 92.3% judged the written tutorials to be good or very good;

• 41.7% said that they were ‘keen to learn more, not afraid of experimenting’;

• 33.3% said they could see the potential of the technologies.

Preferences for technologies was also observed:

• Slideshare was considered difficult by 30.8% of participants;

• Posterous was considered the most useful at 46.2%;

• The videoconferencing session was well received offering a promising attitude to synchronous communication.

Nola and her team discovered the financial savings an organisation can make with blended learning.
After Essex ACL held discussions with colleagues at Anglia Ruskin University, a model of fees was drafted according to the ratio of face-to-face versus distance learning activity.

It was decided:

- Face-to-face 5 hr taught course would cost the organisation 5 hrs x £30/hr tutor cost = £150;
- Blended learning course of 4 hrs distance and 1 hr face-to-face might only cost 2 hrs x £30/hr tutor cost = £60 (the second hour representing synchronous or asynchronous contact).

As a result, Essex ACL found that fees charged to learners should reduce as a blended course is amended, updated, reused and shared.

Essex ACL decided to use mostly free technologies to keep the fees for learners low. Both tutors and students will also save time and cut fuel costs with such videoconferencing tools as Flashmeeting.

The lessons learned

Looking back, Nola and her team have a number of helpful hints and tips for other providers.

- Pick your team wisely and try to have one overall coordinator;
- Keep the technologies as simple as possible, and link them to technologies people have already used;
- Look outside your immediate group for expertise;
- Follow the LSIS reporting process as it gives the project a good structure;
- Identify the level of tutors’ ICT skills early on in the project. This knowledge was useful for planning future staff development;
- Try to keep tutors’ ICT skills updated. Once accustomed to blended learning, tutors should be more inclined to take part in CPD in this way; Provide training in the pedagogical reasoning behind the use of technology.

Essex ACL have now started working to develop the toolkit and blended learning even further.
• A Skills for Life numeracy tutor is using the Posterous tutorial for numeracy teaching, and another tutor is using it for construction;

• Grammar modules are set to be incorporated into learning objects in Posterous;

• Blended learning modules are being developed to teach lip-reading and deaf awareness.

Useful links

http://www.essex.gov.uk/Education-Schools/Adult-Learning/

Disclaimer

Disclaimer: Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.