Network Training Services Ltd
Developing a consistent and supportive approach to blended learning (October 2016)

Summary

Network Training Services Ltd are creating interactive learning resources which are distributed to learners via their online learning platform, providing quality assured and engaging resources. The staff responsible for creating the learning resources work closely with delivery teams and learners, consulting, co-creating and piloting resources prior to full release. The tailored approach and opportunity to play an active role in the developing process is building staff confidence and encouraging new styles of delivery.

Based in Port Talbot, Network Training Services are required to embed digital literacy skills for learners as part of the Welsh Government and Qualification Wales’ decision to replace ICT functional skills with a Digital Literacy qualification. Practitioners also deliver the Welsh Government policy requirement of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship which is embedded into programmes of learning at all levels.

The challenge

The changes to Apprenticeships and the emphasis on new standards and changes in expectations of what the learning experience should offer led Philippa Wood, CPD coordinator/cydlynydd DP at Network Training Services, to review the learning experience that apprentices were receiving. Learners had difficulties understanding the standards, the underpinning principles and criteria as well as what evidence was required. Assessors reported that they had to spend a considerable amount of time going over the standards with learners.

Her own experience as a learner studying for a Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) inspired her to take action.
"Having engaged in study which was supported by online learning and access to an academic library and resources I felt that our learners would benefit from these options."

Philippa Wood, cydlynydd DP/CPD coordinator, Network Training Services Ltd

The assessors working with apprentices are subject experts but not all were confident in using digital technology to enhance teaching and learning. Continuous professional development (CPD) to support these staff also needed to be provided.

A further challenge is that all learning takes place in the workplace and learners find it difficult to obtain release or find transport to attend workshop sessions.

The solution

As part of her studies, Philippa had explored the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and online learning. She suggested that the company develop their own solution which would initially be delivered on a one-to-one basis between assessors and learners for a couple of hours each month.

The company began a pilot scheme to create resources using articulate software which drew on the expertise of the teams who were leading work on the apprenticeship standards, engaging them in the research and development processes as an integral approach to CPD. The focus in the first stage was to remove repetition for assessors and improve clarity and consistency for learners by explaining what the standards and criteria meant and by giving lots of examples of the sort of evidence that was required.

Standardising the resources helped to ensure that things like the underpinning principles were easy to understand. The resource team also created videos and quizzes to make the learning more interesting and accessible to a wide variety of learning styles.

Initially the resources created were stored on the corporate website and links to the relevant resources were emailed out to learners. The company now also uses the SmartAssessor e-portfolio system and work is underway to find a new home for the resources (some of which are quite large files) that aligns with the e-portfolio.

The company has used the lessons learned from the pilot to create new resources for other subjects and programmes with the intention of rolling this out across all routes. New modules to support the digital literacy essential skill are also planned and further opportunities for flipped learning have been identified. Recognising how important technology is becoming in the teaching and learning environment the company have focused on improving their staffing resource by employing digital literacy subject experts to drive forward this aspect of learning and provide peer support.
Impact

“We trialled the resources we created with 30 students. The vast majority of learners liked them. They said that the resources meant that they could access guidance on-demand without having to wait for an assessor to visit them.”

Philippa Wood, cydlynwydd DP/CPD coordinator, Network Training Services Ltd

Of the learners that used the blended learning resources, all liked it and one learner even created their own video. Feedback indicates that learners like having 24/7 access and regarded it as a ‘one stop shop’ where everything they need is available. The interactive resources are motivating and engaging, offering a variety of ways to learn. Learners who need support with English found that being able to look at the resources whenever they wanted and as frequently as they needed, at their own pace and time was also helpful.

Staff have noted that the blended learning approach and access to quality assured resources is fostering greater independence in learning and is encouraging apprentices to be more proactive and take ownership of their own learning. This, on its own, represents a significant labour-saving strategy for assessors in addition to the deeper learning that this approach can facilitate. Funding pressures mean that assessor time with learners is very pressured so the more learners can be supported with blended learning and helped to apply this in the workplace, the better.

Philippa has also noted that the change of approach is facilitating improved communication between assessors, apprentices and their employers and enabling time for more in-depth discussion and coaching to take place to ensure both apprentices and employers are getting what they need from the overall experience.

The hope is that the blended approach will help to improve completion rates and the timeliness of completion although the data is not yet available to support this.

Key points

» The change management aspects of an initiative like this are very important. Many good ideas developed by individuals succeed or fail if you do not have senior management support as well as engagement and buy-in from all levels. Keeping people informed and using identified change drivers that others can relate to are essential; people need to understand the benefits and their role in bringing about change.

» Don’t underestimate how much effort needs to go into bringing staff on board and ‘selling’ changes to delivery. Not everyone will initially see the benefits – some staff saw how it would make their lives easier, took it on board and loved it. Engaging staff at standardisation meetings and inviting them to choose the units the team are creating content for is helping to ease the change of delivery style. The company works
with a key member of the team (sometimes, but not always, the team leader) to co-create content and share it back with the team, as well as to show staff how to access the resources and how they work before they go live. Tailoring the approach to individual teams is helping to build staff confidence.

» The Welsh Government and Qualification Wales’ decision to replace ICT functional skills with a Digital Literacy qualification is making a difference and requires both staff and learners to develop their digital literacy skills. Time and support is needed to help less digitally literate assessors to develop these essential skills.

» Inevitably there are resource implications in using staff time to create resources, develop new approaches and CPD opportunities that need to be factored in to implementation plans with appropriate budgetary provision made.

» Support from organisations such as Jisc provides invaluable help on aspects such as copyright, ensuring equality of access for learners and mobile learning.

» Be prepared for technical issues – some of the resources created were big files and deciding where the most appropriate place to house resources and make them easily accessible to learners via their own devices is an important design consideration.

More information

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