Royal Artillery Centre for Personal Development

Online delivery and support for Functional Skills in Mathematics, English and ICT (October 2016)

Summary

The Royal Artillery Centre for Personal Development is developing a bespoke VLE and piloting online delivery of functional skills in English, mathematics and ICT to support apprentices who may have difficulty attending scheduled sessions for operational reasons and to provide cost-effective delivery and support for learners based in remote locations. While it is too early to provide statistical data, early indications are that the learners enjoy the interactive activities, that team work and collaboration between staff has increased and that the model is cost effective.

The challenge

The Royal Artillery Centre for Personal Development (RACPD) provides apprenticeships and nationally recognised qualifications to the Royal Artillery, other Service personnel and the wider defence community including veterans and dependants. Soldiers ranging from age 16 to 30 are offered opportunities to study for apprenticeships as they come in to the army and as they progress in their army careers. Functional skills are an integral part of apprenticeships.

Some of the challenges involved in delivering learning and support for functional skills that the RACPD wanted to address include:

» At the start of their apprenticeships learners have a two-week initial training period with the RACPD. Providing flexible ongoing support outside of this initial period will help apprentices to achieve the functional skills requirements.

» Some learners are stationed away from central hubs, sometimes overseas or in remote locations.

» Operational duties may prevent service personnel from attending planned training sessions.
It is sometimes difficult to get all those who need support with a particular aspect of their training together in one place at one time.

In addition, teachers found it difficult to provide sufficiently agile differentiation of learning and to respond to the differing levels and needs of learners on any given day.

Many of the learners are young and are familiar with technology. Staff felt that there were more opportunities to embrace use of technology to support learning and meet learner expectations. This aligns with the recommendations from the Further Education Learning Technology Advisory Group (FELTAG) and the Skills Funding Agency response which encourages the use of online learning and a ‘greater blend’ of delivery and assessment types.

The centre had already developed a virtual learning environment (VLE) to support teacher education and identified opportunities to expand use of the platform to include provision for learners.

A combination of all of these factors provided a useful focus for a parallel initiative to develop the digital skills and confidence of teaching staff in blended learning.

The solution

RACPD began using technology to deliver the functional skills elements of apprenticeship programmes approximately two years ago. The project has been managed by an external consultant and supported by a VLE specialist. Work underway includes the curation of teaching resources for ICT, mathematics and English, the building and development of an in-house VLE and an online delivery programme for mathematics and English. In addition, a fully online ICT course has been created by start-up company Proversity. Staff are developing a full, contextualised mathematics course at level 2 and work is underway to develop something similar for English within the next few months.

A train-the-trainer approach is being used to cascade the training to RACPD staff, all of whom are now able to use the VLE. Staff have also received training in techniques for online tutoring and effective use of technologies such as TeamViewer and the Google suite of collaborative tools which includes Google hangouts. This enables teachers to support participants from different locations. Two members of staff have received specific training to author and manage content and have a remit to ensure the learning resources and experiences offered are interactive.

All soldiers now watch a series of functional skills videos which have been planned and are presented by their teachers. Production support for the videos was provided by external consultants but the participation by RACPD teachers in the video planning and production processes has facilitated a high quality integrated approach to delivery of the subject matter.

Staff have also been working to upload resources such as quizzes, questionnaires, video clips and animations to support functional skills. Existing resources have been reviewed, quality assured and redesigned for online use.
The VLE has been re-skinned to ensure it works well on mobile devices and the PCs in the centres have been upgraded to ensure they function at an appropriate speed.

Where sessions are delivered online the learner and tutor have an agreed time to meet using either Google hangout or TeamViewer. Care is taken to ensure that both teachers and learners have access to the right equipment (laptop/PC, headphone and microphone). Activities include chat and live discussion, live editing of shared documents and onscreen presentations. TeamViewer allows teachers to control learner screens so they can be shown specific content and guided to appropriate resources.

Learners are asked to feedback on their online learning experiences during regular reviews and the feedback is being used to refine delivery and approaches.

Access to reliable WiFi can still be an issue where learners are accessing the systems from remote locations and work to address this problem is ongoing.

Impact

The move to blended learning and increased use of the VLE is still underway so the impact has not yet been fully measured. However, piloting of the ICT and mathematics resources and approaches with learners has been well received and online learning has been successfully delivered to participants based in varied locations.

Staff at the RACPD feel that making more use of technology to support learning is helping them to make the most of the resources they have at their disposal to enrich the learning experience and improve differentiation. They are becoming more adventurous with their delivery and are feeling better skilled and more motivated. The project has facilitated greater collaboration and strong team work amongst staff.

“Over the past year we have been developing our delivery of functional skills for apprentices through technology and have built an in-house VLE and an online delivery programme for mathematics and English. Our experiences so far show that this has enriched the learning experience – we are better able to provide differentiation, teachers can direct students to appropriate resources and give more 1:1 time to others.”

Claire Foxley, chief executive, The Royal Artillery Centre for Personal Development
Key points

» Get staff buy in as early as possible, involve them in the development and make them the experts. Regular meetings, constructive feedback and good communication are also important.

» Encourage staff to share ideas and new skills – working in small teams or pairs has helped staff to do this and provided valuable peer support.

» Inevitably other priorities intervene but it is important to try to keep development work continuous and stay on task. Balancing the time needed for staff to develop skills and resources as well as continue to deliver learning needs careful management.

» Allow plenty of time for important processes such as testing, gathering and responding to feedback, editing and quality assurance which can take longer than you anticipate.

» RACPD found it beneficial to use external consultants with specialist expertise in areas outside their starting skills-set. In addition to overall project management, consultancy support was used to develop the VLE and to support video production and the design of online courses.

More information

Links: http://www.racpd.org.uk

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