Case study: Enabling distance learning through open platforms

Outstanding, teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA)

South West Region

What was the purpose of the project?

The project sought ways to address the Ofsted finding of the need to embed IT in order to support ‘out of classroom’ extension activities. This was a particular issue for Bristol City Council as (in partnership with North Somerset and South Gloucestershire) it provides a wide range of Community Learning courses. These are delivered by a team of nearly 100 tutors to around 3,500 learners each year. The previous culture within the consortium was mostly resistant to the use of IT, due to a skills shortfall, as well as the inherent difficulties associated with delivering courses across many disparate venues with mostly self-employed staff.

What did the project do?

Bristol City Council wanted to move away from having information locked in separate silos to making systems more open to all. The project focused on the creation of simple bite-size solutions and open-source tools. Tutors could use these to positively impact the quality of teaching, without undue setup time.

The project set out to increase and improve the quality of embedded IT materials in all courses by:

* providing clear guidance to all staff on the appropriate use of IT and safeguarding issues
* allowing students to access additional resources outside of classrooms to further their learning.

This was done by:

* developing a web portal - to bring together teaching materials aimed at students (and where tutors would not require a login)
* creating new resources for tutor use across a number of topics (including Employability, IT, maths and English) adding their own materials in turn
* deploying training materials (video and paper guides) to support the use of specific recommended open-source tools for tutors
* running additional training sessions and visits to classes by IT support staff.

What helped the project succeed?

Holding a development day for hard to engage tutors helped to disseminate information further than initially anticipated, and impacted positively on tutor attitudes. The general consensus from staff was not only that it worked well, but that they would have used it more, if only “they’d known how easy it was”. Engagement with an early trial for cloud storage and chat applications allowed the project team to work collaboratively online in an easy and streamlined fashion.

What challenges did the project face?

The project faced the following practical problems that remain challenging:

* many courses are not delivered in dedicated training rooms or in consistent locations
* internet connectivity, when working across multiple sites incurred different rules and restrictions
* websites were often blocked
* there was often no technical support available
* many tutors found that computers or display equipment access settings changed or were even removed in between teaching sessions
* mobile internet hotspots were sometimes limited to a small number of devices and therefore unsuited to whole class delivery
* where internet was available, the physical process of carrying and setting up 10-12 laptops before a class was challenging

What difference did the project make?

The project made the following differences:

* 65% of tutors reported that they used IT in classes ‘most or all of the time’ (up from 45% before the project)
* 83% of tutors felt that they had additional IT resources available to students (up from 57%)
* the website developed by the partnership went from 1,000 views per month to 3,400 during the period of the project
* in the same period, there were 500 views across 14 new ICT instructional videos for staff, as well as training videos that staff can deliver directly to students
* the project’s YouTube channel hit 1,700 views
* five training packages were developed including ‘Digital Skills’ and ‘Employability’
* a set of multiple ‘how to’ guides, along with support materials, have also been created. These were shared online through an open platform and disseminated via newsletter, blog and social media.
* Staff engagement targets doubled, with over 20 staff actively participating by the end of the project, and an additional 46 invited to participate.
* Learner targets were exceeded - around 80 learners with identified barriers to learning engaged with the resources.
* Finally, new equipment for delivering ICT training was delivered to the North Somerset partners.

Where can I find more information?

Useful resources for tutors were uploaded to the [Bristol City Council website](http://communitylearningwest.net/online-training-1-5-tutor-resources/) at http://communitylearningwest.net/online-training-1-5-tutor-resources/.

For more information contact James Bruton, Digital Inclusion Manager Learning, Bristol City Council, james.bruton@bristol.gov.uk

**“This project has helped us face up to our unique challenges in tackling our previous IT-adverse delivery culture.”** **James Bruton, Team Lead, Digital Learning, Bristol City Council**