

9: Using web conferencing with distributed work-based learners

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Background

The Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE), delivered by the University of Aberdeen, provides in-service training for over 100 lecturers from Scottish Further Education colleges each year. Participants may come from any discipline area – including a wide variety of vocational areas - and have a range of educational qualifications from professional recognition in their discipline area through to PhD level. The programme is offered in various ‘blends’ including a ‘Working Together On-campus’ model which includes face to face workshops, independent study and the use of online resources and a ‘Working Together Online’ model, in which the face to face workshops are replaced by synchronous web conferencing events using Elluminate. It is experiences of the synchronous online events which are this focus of this case study.

Intended outcome(s)

Following the success of earlier online workshops which had been developed using discussion forums in WebCT and integrated into the programme to replace a small number of face to face events, the aim of using web conferencing was to develop an online workshop experience which more closely replicated the face to face experience. It was also hoped that these web conferencing workshops (delivered using Elluminate) would address the needs of a wider range of participants (including those from remote colleges). The use of web conferencing on TQFE began in autumn 2009 with the launch of the ‘Working Together Online’ version of the programme.

The challenge

The programme aims to provide a learning environment which supports reflection on practice, enables collaborative investigation through communities of enquiry, and models good practice so that participants are better able to respond to the challenges they face in their own professional practice. The challenge for the course team was whether these objectives could be met using a virtual classroom? Questions were raised at the outset about the quality of the experience for individual learners, the ability to create a supporting learning community, and the skills and flexibility required by tutors.

The model for the ‘Working Together Online’ programme did not dispense entirely with face to face events. An ‘induction’ day was retained, hosted at the University, to allow participants to be introduced to the programme, to become familiar with the technology to be used, and start to

develop a sense of group identity. Following this, all events were online, and included tutor led workshops, assignment tutorials, tutor 'open office' sessions and student led sessions.

Established practice

To address the diverse learning styles and preferences of participants the TQFE programme is an activity based, flexible programme which has at its core a set of activities which can be undertaken independently or in small groups by learners, or as facilitated activities in face to face and online workshops and tutorials (Cornelius *et al.*, 2009). Access to these activities is via an online 'Lexicon' hosted in WebCT. Learners are not directed to tackle the activities in any particular order, but to make their own decisions about which to undertake based on their personal learning needs and professional interests. Tutors make selections from the activities to create both face to face and online workshops.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

A post-programme questionnaire survey and interviews were undertaken with the first three groups of students to complete the 'Working Together Online' programme. The 16 respondents (76% of the cohort) had each engaged in around 44 hours of activity in Elluminate. The use of the web conferencing workshops provided respondents with a convenient and flexible approach. All were unfamiliar with Elluminate before the course, but they found it generally easy to use. The approach offered opportunities for communication and interaction and highlighted the critical role of voice in this context.

Tutors' experiences (n=6) have also been gathered from reflective diaries and interviews. For tutors there have been major savings in travel times (for example fortnightly round trips of up to 360 miles from Aberdeen to participating colleges have been eradicated). Perhaps more important though is the opportunity that the repurposing of the course content for web conferencing workshops has provided for creative endeavours, team teaching, and discussion and reflection on practice.

For the university, in addition to the savings on travel budgets, the TQFE now has additional options for increasing recruitment and the development of flexible models of delivery. For example, new students have been recruited from remote parts of Scotland and the delivery mode altered to allow options for 12 month and 18 month completion times.

Key points for effective practice

Findings from evaluation with learners and tutors suggest the following points should be taken into consideration by others adopting web conferencing.

1. *Learner Preparation*

Learners need to prepare themselves for using the technology. This includes becoming familiar with the technology and establishing an appropriate study environment with adequate peer support. They also value the opportunity to prepare for individual sessions. Although participants are asked to log in early for workshops to check their technical set up it has been useful to include 'icebreaker' or other informal activities at the start of each session to allow any difficulties to be ironed out before the start of 'formal' proceedings. Elluminate workshops have been held successfully at regular times during the normal working day which has facilitated preparation and participation.

2. *Communication and Interaction*

Learners valued the tools for interaction and liked sessions which included lots of variety of activities. They also engaged extensively in student-led use of the technology. Tutors therefore need to develop a wide repertoire of activities using a range of the technical tools available, and working as a tutor team has been particularly valuable in this regard.

The lack of visual clues that provide feedback is a concern to some students and tutors (video facilities were rarely used), and although both valued the use of tools such as emoticons to provide feedback these were not found sufficient to compensate for the lack of non-verbal signals.

3. *Technical issues*

The quality of audio has a particular impact on learners in an environment where voice is important. Other technical issues (such as problems with servers), are often beyond the participants' control and can be frustrating.

4. *Co-tutoring*

The value of working as a team to prepare and deliver the Elluminate workshops has been significant. The repertoire of activities that have been developed, and the insights gained into the technology and its effectiveness have benefited from this co-operation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the majority of learners responding to the evaluation survey (75%) were satisfied with the use of Elluminate on the TQFE. Eighty-one percent would recommend courses using Elluminate to others and 76% would consider using it their own practice. For this group of learners Elluminate has provided a convenient and flexible approach for their studies. It has permitted participation where it might otherwise have been impossible, and allowed interaction and collaboration to take place. Team development has been particularly valuable for tutors working on the programme.

However, we feel there is still further to go to understand the 'duality' of experience in a web conferencing environment for learners and tutors and further work (supported by ELESIG) is being undertaken during 2011 to explore experiences of different facilitation strategies and individual activities.

Additional information: Sources

Programme web page: www.abdn.ac.uk/tqfe

Blog for ELESIG funded research (forthcoming – details will be available at elesig.ning.com)

Cornelius, SC., Gordon, CA. and Ackland, A. (2011) Designing flexible learning for adult professionals an activity-focused course design, *Interactive Learning Environments*, 19 (4), 381-394. Available at <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10494820903298258>>

Cornelius, S. (2011) Convenience and Community? An exploratory investigation into learners' experiences of web conferencing. Paper submitted to *Ed Media 2011*