

FE4: TO WHAT EXTENT DO “BITE-SIZED” ICT COURSES WIDEN PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES?

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Aim

This research activity aims to establish the impact of introducing additional e-learning resources (digital cameras and scanning equipment) on participation in the Newgate Community Learning Centre.

Background

The ICT Test Bed Project has brought many additional resources into Bishop Auckland College. These resources have also been taken out to the six Community Learning Venues of which three are ICT Test Bed Centres because they are within the Durham cluster ICT Test Bed area.

The largest of these Centres is the “Newgate Community Learning Centre”, based in a shopping precinct in Bishop Auckland town centre.

As part of the Course Evaluation process at the Newgate Centre, existing students were asked to comment on their completed courses and were asked what their learning requirements would be in the future. It was identified that there was a perceived need to learn how to use digital media such as digital cameras and scanners.

The ICT Test Bed Centres had purchased a number of digital cameras and scanners for student use and it was decided that the digital cameras and the scanners would meet the demand that students had.

Planning the bite-sized courses

A three-month strategy was put in place to give existing and new students the opportunity to undertake a one-hour session on either using digital photography or using a scanner. Since these opportunities had never been tried within the centres it could be an innovative, useful plan or it could end up being a wasted effort.

Two sessions per week were scheduled; one being the digital camera session and the other being the scanning session. These sessions were planned on a rota basis and timing would change each week to give everyone who wanted the opportunity to be able to attend a session.

In order to give opportunities to both existing and new students to participate in the sessions we advertised the planned sessions using posters on the external part of the building in the busy main town centre and the staff who work within the centre advertised them to existing students verbally.

Managing the bite-sized courses

The take-up of the sessions was very successful. Of the 85 possible places available over the three-month period all places were booked. However, actual attendance was 94%; the reason for this was either illness or last minute childcare arrangements.

The sessions were totally flexible in that the facilitator was given a remit that identified broad learning outcomes for students wanting to learn the potential of digital cameras. An example of this would be to learn how to focus on an object to allow them to take photographs accurately and to give them a professional result. The actual activities were highly student lead. We gave the students a framework to work within; we then asked the student what they wanted to be able to do with their work. This flexibility and freedom of choice has proven to work, as well as giving an enjoyable experience to the students.

We found that creating a professional but friendly environment encouraged some people to attend the sessions in pairs whether it was two friends who were already students at the centre, husband and wife or two people that became familiar with each other from enrolling at the centre. One lady who has attended the Newgate Centre for three years and undertaken many different courses thought it would be a good opportunity to ask her neighbour who is a lone parent if she would like to have a go at exploring the benefits of using a digital camera. Together that attended the one-hour session to find that they enjoyed it so much they progressed onto the 10 week accredited course together. A similar scenario took place with a lady and her son: a student who had been enrolled on various courses for four years brought her son along to the bite-size session and again they progressed onto the accredited course. The hour-long sessions have proved to provide a bridge between the known friend and the unknown scenario of ICT in college and obviously widened participation.

Feedback forms were handed out to the students at the end of the sessions. The professionalism of the facilitator came across very strongly in the feedback comments as contributing to the sessions being enjoyable, for example:

“Fantastic course and very easy to follow, I would like to see more of them in the centre”

“Paul is a brilliant teacher and makes the session very enjoyable”

The obvious student enjoyment has come from the relaxed non-threatening environment, having fun whilst achieving something and the visual result that they have created themselves. This is also something that they can take away with them and show to their friends and family.

Of course a key aim of this introductory session was to encourage people to participate and extend their learning. To achieve this we made sure that we talked to the group and explained about possible progression if they so wished. There are many progression routes available to the students; we decided that we would give them a clear focus and offer them progression along the route that they started.

The progression from the bite-sized learning sessions for digital camera and scanning use is an accredited course called TROCN - digital imaging course - that is 2 hours per week for 10 weeks. Seventy-nine out of the eighty students expressed an interest in this progression and we are now running two separate TROCN digital imaging courses full to the capacity of 15 per class. We have a waiting list of students who wish to join the next course.

90% of the participants on the bite size sessions have either progressed onto further learning or have added their name to a list of students wanting to undertake the next intake of enrolments onto the progression course.

Conclusion

Why was our strategy successful?

1. It was successful because the sessions were short which made them easy to fit into people's lifestyles and they did not have to commit themselves for long periods of time.
2. There was no pressure of examinations or needing to meet the requirements of a syllabus, and this allowed them to gain confidence in their own abilities and be prepared to learn alongside others and to direct their own learning in a friendly professional atmosphere.
3. The digital imaging resources are very rewarding to use and have allowed us to overcome inhibitions in meeting the needs of the students, and provide a stepping stone to widening participation.

The research clearly demonstrated the benefit of finding attractive and relevant learning opportunities for those who have not engaged recently in learning, as well as giving further opportunities to current students.

Reflection

We also seek to reflect on why new students might approach the Learning Centre. We met as a Centre team and some of the ideas that we came up with are:

1. Customer suggestions – any enquiry for a course is logged in a customer enquiry book this is monitored weekly to identify if there is a demand for a particular course
2. Location of the centre – we are in the centre of a very busy shopping centre
3. Marketing – this is done as a team effort, where everyone discusses an idea and then a joint decision is made, thus ensuring everyone is working towards the same ends.