

Widening participation and E-learning

“Action Research is an intervention in personal practice to encourage improvement for oneself and others. The action is not haphazard or routine, but driven by educational values that need to be explored and defended. It is a practical form of research which recognises that the world is not perfect and that professional values have to be negotiated. It also recognises that, while the focus may be the individual practitioner, individuals are always in company with others”.
(McNiff, Jean, Lomax, Pamela and Whitehead, Jack. You and your action research project. RoutledgeFalmer, 2003, (2nd ed), London).

Introduction

NIACE conducted the Widening Participation and E-learning (WiPE) action research project between November 2004 – July 2005. The project was funded as part of the Learning and Skills Council’s programme to promote e-learning in adult and community learning through the ‘Post-16 e-learning programme’. Organisations were invited to submit bids for funding for innovative e-learning action research projects in the context of widening participation. The intended outcomes of this project were to:

- produce new knowledge and practical theories in the effective use of e-learning and ICT
- to open up learning in terms of delivery and content to ‘hard to reach’ learners
- to identify staff development needs in the use of technology to support teaching and learning.

Approach

NIACE decided to apply the methodology of action research in order to identify effective approaches to widen participation through the use of e-learning. This implies that the project aims were to widen participation and to produce new knowledge, however this knowledge was generated through the generically applicable process of action research. Action research means that a practitioner conducts systematic research into their own practice. Therefore the knowledge that the action researcher generates through this process is in-depth knowledge about a specific situation, which is valuable for a wider group of practitioners but which is clearly only created based on the evidence found in the practitioner’s circumstances.

Rationale

Action research was chosen because it offers an empowering tool for educational providers and practitioners to analyse and improve their own practice in order to provide a better service to learners. Throughout the project NIACE facilitated the

development of the practitioners by supporting them in their work as action researchers, which for the majority of participants was a new role. By doing this NIACE hoped to support practitioners to identify effective approaches for widening participation and to equip them with a generic skill of continuously inquiring and improving their own practice. Through this NIACE aimed to make the project more sustainable, as practitioners would leave the project having developed skills as action researchers.

Participating projects

Twelve successful organisations were selected to conduct action research into their own practice of widening participation through e-learning.

- **Stockton Adult Education Service:** Learners withdrawing from alcohol or drug dependency. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Stockton.pdf>]
- **Kingston College:** Students with mild to moderate learning difficulties. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Kingston.pdf>]
- **Somerset College of Arts and Technology:** Employees of small or medium sized businesses without formal qualifications. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Somerset.pdf>]
- **Bournemouth Adult Learning:** Young unemployed mothers reluctant to engage in formal learning. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Bournemouth.pdf>]
- **Kent Adult Education Service:** Visually impaired learners who have few or no computer skills and have not attended adult education classes. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Kent.pdf>]
- **Preston College:** Existing students and tutors as well as hard-to-reach groups that include the homeless, the elderly and those who require help with basic skills. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Preston.pdf>]
- **Northern College:** Individuals who are without formal qualifications and are seeking to return to learning. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Northern.pdf>]
- **Medway Adult and Community Learning Service:** Members of the community with a large number of people on state benefits, in particular the unemployed and single parents, and who currently do not take part in any form of creative study class or activity. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Medway.pdf>]
- **Newcastle under Lyme:** Hard-to-reach learners in a range of community venues. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Newcastle.pdf>]
- **Bolton Community College:** Older learners, with enduring mental health issues. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Bolton.pdf>]
- **Brixton Online:** Owners and employees of micro, small and medium sized business and unskilled/semi-skilled and the long-term unemployed individuals. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/Brixton.pdf>]

- **North Lincolnshire Adult Education Service:** Hard-to-reach learners out in the community, groups of learners who for many reasons cannot attend a centre and who do not currently use IT within their learning. [<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ICT/WIPE/NorthLincs.pdf>]

1. Identify the learners' needs

Identifying the learners' needs might not sound like a revolutionary new concept. However, one quite commonly shared experience of the WiPE projects was the realisation that participants *thought they knew* what the learners needed and wanted. However, systematic reflection and data analysis showed that the real needs and wants of the learners were often different to what they anticipated. Action research proved a powerful approach to this.

Examples of identifying learners' needs:

- Medway Adult and Community Learning Service: Identifying the community's wants and needs regarding creative study.
- Kent Adult Education Service: Identifying the needs of visually impaired learners for learning at home and at a centre.
- Stockton College: Identifying how the needs of learners withdrawing from alcohol or drug dependency can be met.
- Kingston College: Identifying how learners with mild to moderate learning difficulties can be supported to become more independent through the use of e-learning.
- Bournemouth Adult Learning: Identifying if an e-learning project can encourage young single mothers to take up learning.
- Brixton Online: Identifying and addressing barriers to learning to inform the development of effective learning resources.

2. E-learning works

Another common theme was that e-learning offers the potential for providing learner-centred provision. E-learning can offer flexibility and an informal learning environment, which can be non-threatening to learners. The key point about e-learning was how it was used; using e-learning to meet the learners' needs (see theme 1) was the most important rule.

Examples of effective e-learning:

- Preston College: Using interactive CD-ROMs in the community to attract hard-to-reach learners to enhance their basic skills.
- Northern College: Using e-learning in a residential college to support residents to return to learning.
- North Lincolnshire Adult Education Service: Using digital cameras to reach potential learners in the community who usually do not have access to centres.
- Bolton Community College: Using a data projector and interactive software to engage older learners and learners with mental health difficulties.

3. Staff development

Most projects found that in order to use e-learning effectively, staff needed to enhance their e-learning skills. The skills required include technical e-learning skills as well as pedagogical skills. Through the action research projects practitioners were able to define the individual development needs.

Examples of staff development:

- Newcastle under Lyme College: Identifying barriers and staff development needs for tutors to use ICT and e-learning.
- Kingston College: Identifying development needs for tutors to use technology effectively.
- Kent Adult Education Service: Identification of staff development needs in order to effectively support visually impaired learners to access learning.
- Somerset College of Arts and Technology: Identification of staff learning needs in order to use equipment effectively.

4. Organisational contexts

Most projects found that in order to effectively reach out to more and different learners they needed to analyse their own approaches and attitudes towards their target groups, and to also recognise the impact of organisational contexts. In order to improve practice and learning provision, the wider organisation needs to enquire into their practice and approaches.

Examples of impacts of organisational contexts:

- Somerset College of Arts and Technology: Identification of organisational strategy to enhance workplace learning.
- Medway Adult Education Service: Analysis of outreach practice and of effective networking with other organisations.

5. Change is possible

Whilst not all projects immediately attracted hard-to-reach learners, they were able to gain an enhanced insight and understanding of their organisations. Through applying action research methodology and applying the reflective spiral they were able to identify staff development needs, and implications for future provision. By enquiring into their own practice they were able to identify areas for change and to gain a better understanding of the potential learners' needs and wants.

Examples of change and implications for future provision:

- Medway Adult Education Service: enhanced understanding of the relationship between the community and the service.
- Newcastle under Lyme College: the momentum of the action research project lead to an increased embedding of e-learning throughout the college.

6. Action research as a tool for professional development

The majority of participants had never conducted an action research project before, and most of them also stated that they would conduct action research again if they had the opportunity. They also stated that they found the action research as conducted in the WiPE project beneficial for their professional development. This can be supported by the individual action research reports that show how professional learning and development has taken place throughout the project.

Examples of the use of action research as a tool for professional development:

- Northern College: Conducting research into their own practice enhanced the action researcher's reflective practice and allowed them a more in-depth insight.
- Bournemouth Adult Education Service: Conducting research into their own practice enhanced the action researcher's reflective practice and offered them a better understanding of their learners' needs and wishes.

7. The potential of e-learning lies in blended learning

Most projects showed that e-learning has the potential to be a powerful approach to reach more and different learners. However, most projects showed that the key to success does not lie in e-learning itself but in how it is being used. The majority of projects used e-learning in a blended format, i.e. in a community centre or a class-room type meeting.

Examples of effective blended learning:

- Stockton Adult Education Service: Use of e-learning in a setting that learners are comfortable with and feel safe in.
- Northern College: E-learning as an alternative offer for learning in a residential setting.
- Bolton Community College: Offering e-learning in a non-threatening familiar setting to learners with mental health difficulties.

NIACE Contact

For more information, or feedback and comments, please contact:

Claudia Hesse, Project Officer, ICT and Learning Team

Email: claudia.hesse@niace.org.uk

To view the full WiPE report, please view:

[<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/ict/WiPE-final-report.pdf>]

This is the seventieth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

69. Older people and learning—key statistics
68. Learning in later life
67. Adult education working in care settings
66. Adult participation in learning
65. Learning and Skills Council funding for literacy, language and numeracy
64. Embedding literacy, language and numeracy
63. Promoting financial capability for older people
62. Ideas for using ICT in adult and community learning
61. Adults in higher education

Requests for briefing sheets in other formats, such as large print are welcomed, we will be pleased to consider your request. Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE

21 De Montfort Street

Leicester, LE1 7GE

Tel: 0116 204 4289

Email: information@niace.org.uk

They are also available on the website at www.niace.org.uk/information

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322