

Walking the e-walk: lifelong learning for all

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In 2005 the Centre for Career and Personal Development at Canterbury Christ Church University designed a Certificate in Careers Education and Guidance course delivered by e-learning. The course is aimed at people involved in careers work in schools, many of whom are qualified teachers, and it began in October of that year. This paper will present an evaluation study of the experiences of one group of students who completed the course that year. It will begin with a discussion of the rationale for the course itself and its design in relation to the theory and practice of e-learning and continuing professional development. This will be followed by a critique of the qualitative methodology of the study and an analysis of the data gathered. It will conclude with recommendations for schools and others involved in education who may wish to encourage their staff to engage in CPD through e-learning, and for universities who may wish to develop such provision.

Introduction and rationale for the course

This paper focuses on an evaluation of the experiences of a group of participants who undertook the Certificate in Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) in 2005-06. The policy background is described in order to set the scene, followed by a description of the structure of the course and its aims. The paper then goes on to outline the methodology of the evaluation study and an analysis of the data gathered. It concludes with recommendations for practice.

Following the introduction of the Connexions strategy and service (DfEE, 2000), a range of delivery models for Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) evolved in England. In some areas the responsibility for CEG became subsumed within the broader Connexions strategy of supporting

young people holistically (an integrated approach), and in others responsibilities for CEG were contracted out to specialist providers with expertise in this area (a contracted out approach).

Following the adoption of an integrated approach, one Connexions partnership contacted a member of staff from Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) in order to discuss their current CEG education and training needs. Within the partnership, many Connexions personal advisers (PAs) staff had entered the service from a variety of different professional backgrounds. In addition many of the staff with knowledge and expertise in careers work had left the organisation, leaving a recognised knowledge and skills gap. As a result, many of the staff were being asked to deliver CEG with little previous knowledge and experience of careers work. In addition, staff in schools had not always had the opportunity to access relevant professional training and development because of the pressures of timetabled commitments. Schools within the partnership area were keen for careers work to be developed and for staff to receive good quality education and training in this area.

At the same time, CCCU had been designing and writing a Certificate in CEG course to be delivered through blended learning. The course comprises materials written specifically for the course and available on Blackboard its virtual learning environment, discussion boards (again on Blackboard), group tutorials and written assignments. The course had been designed using e-learning, as CCCU had recognised from its long experience of running similar courses combining distance and face-to-face learning that careers teachers had increasingly found it difficult to take time out of school to attend in-service training opportunities.

Following an initial meeting with staff from the partnership it was decided to offer a Certificate course for pairs of staff; the careers co-ordinator and the PA from a particular school. In this way it was hoped that together they could have a greater impact on the CEG programme in the school and act as a force for change. The course was run as a pilot with a planned evaluation, in order to gather feedback and make any appropriate changes, in order to assess how the course could best be offered in the future.

The course itself

The Certificate in CEG is structured as follows:

THEMES	CERTIFICATE COURSE	
	Course 1: Understanding Careers Education and Guidance	Course 2: Providing Careers Education and Guidance
Developing your practice	Unit 1: The scope and value of CEG	Unit 5: Methods and techniques
Developing your role in CEG	Unit 2: Reviewing your role in CEG	Unit 6: Facilitating young people's career learning and development
Developing CEG in your organisational setting	Unit 3: Integrated CEG	Unit 7: Delivering and entitlement to CEG
Harnessing support for developing CEG	Unit 4: Policy and practice	Unit 8: Working with partners

The course materials were written by Anthony Barnes, a recognised expert in the field of CEG and are accessed through the university's virtual learning platform, Blackboard. The participants were already working as careers professionals and the course materials were written in order to enable them to reflect on and learn from their professional experience (Kolb, 1984). The materials themselves are rooted in professional practice, with readings and activities relevant to the work setting. The course provides a strong blend of theory, policy and practice in relation to CEG, and seeks to equip people with the knowledge and understanding they need to evaluate and seek to improve provision. It also enables people to develop their practice giving a careers-related qualification with HE credits to those who complete successfully, thereby facilitating lifelong career learning amongst the participants.

Evidence of Salmon's (2000; 2002) five-stage framework can be seen in the design of the course and these will now be highlighted. The course began in mid October 2005 with a half day induction (Stage 1 access and motivation) and the aim of this was to introduce participants to the course and to Blackboard. The session gave participants the opportunity to become familiar with the technology and to gain an overview of the demands of the course. It was held in an IT room at the service's local training centre, with each participant having access to a PC, so that the session could be as active as possible. The practical issues of passwords, login procedures, e mail accounts and course registration were dealt with and every participant had the opportunity to send and receive e mails and to participate in a discussion board designed to help them to practise communicating with a group of people online and to build their confidence. Dates for four future group

meetings and the two deadline dates for assignments were negotiated and set. Some time was also spent in scheduling activities, so that the participants had a picture of what the course involved; Module 1 was to be studied until mid-February, and Module 2 from then until the second week of June.

Salmon stages

Stage 1: access & motivation

Stage 2: online socialisation

Stage 3: information exchange

Stage 4: knowledge construction

Stage 5: development

Four weeks later the first group meeting was held and the time was spent discussing progress so far and in helping two people who had joined the course late to complete their registration process and access the materials. The participants spent time in small groups discussing the theory covered in the course to date and in discussing strategies for success. Although the session was held face to face, many of the processes mirrored Stage 2 of Salmon's process in relation to socialisation.

The second group meeting was held towards the end of January, and it was devoted to preparation for the Module 1 assignment due to be submitted towards the end of February. During the meeting the task was explained and discussed, the relevant literature was reviewed and sources

to help with Harvard referencing were highlighted. By this time the discussion boards were in fairly regular use by some members, and participants had begun to share information (Stage 3). Following the meeting participants wrote their first assignment and engaged in knowledge construction (Stage 4).

The third group meeting was held in early April the time was spent discussing the Module 2 material, accessing useful websites and on an introduction to the second assignment.

The last group meeting was held in mid May and was devoted to the preparation for the second assignment, along with some time for individual tutorials for those who wanted them. Following this all participants submitted either a careers programme for their own school that they had constructed in the light of what they had learned on the course, or a critique of a careers event planned and carried out in partnership with other organisations (Stage 5).

Initially 12 people started the course and six completed successfully, with a full range of marks awarded, from pass to distinction. No-one failed a piece of work, and it was clear that all of the participants had constructed valuable knowledge and understanding of careers work and had developed knowledge and skills in relation to careers work. The quality of the work submitted was such that it was suggested to two of the participants that they consider disseminating their work through conferences and publication. Of the six who withdrew, two left the service and four (including the two careers co-ordinators on the course) decided not to continue.

Methodology

In order to undertake a thorough and reflective evaluation of the course an interpretivist case study method was used. This particular case study was qualitative, and, as Stake (2000:435) argues, 'Case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry'. As a method, case studies serve as a means of gaining more knowledge of the world and in this particular case, the world of the participants and their continuing professional development in relation to careers work. All participants (including those who withdrew from the course) were asked to take part in a one-to-one interview with the course tutor which took place in the partnership's office. As the tutor had built strong positive relationships with the participants (particularly those who had completed the course), the interviews were seen as a means of gathering rich data and a range of views on the experiences of doing the course. Interviews were chosen in preference to questionnaires in order to try and gain the in-depth views of the participants. Prior to the start of the interviews the tutor concerned assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity, and asked for honesty regarding the weaknesses of the course as well as the strengths. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with each

participant being asked the same set of questions. Two separate sets of questions were devised; one for those who completed successfully and one for those who withdrew. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour.

During the interviews the tutor took detailed notes. These were given to the participants immediately after their interview for checking. If any participant felt they had been misrepresented in any way, they were given the opportunity to change the notes in order to reflect their views more accurately. One participant chose to make a minor amendment to the notes under one question, otherwise the notes were all accepted.

Five out of the six people who completed the course successfully were interviewed, with the sixth being interviewed over the phone the following week. None of the people who withdrew from the course accepted the offer of an interview, and all were telephoned three times during the month of the evaluation in order to seek to gain their views. Unfortunately, only one response was received, and this person was again interviewed over the telephone. It is possible that the people who withdrew from the course would have felt more comfortable being interviewed by someone not involved in the course, rather than the course tutor, although this was not possible within the timeframe of the study.

Data analysis

The interviews began with general questions regarding the course and moved on to more specific areas. This analysis will begin with the views of those who completed the course successfully.

The learning experience

When asked what was good about the course the participants all responded positively and said that they had enjoyed it. The content of the materials was described as:

"really interesting and pertinent"

and

"relevant to my last job and to this one."

One participant described the course as:

"...a very sharp learning curve... [it] opened my eyes. [As an experienced person] you think you know it all, but you don't. There was a lot of reading but it was extremely illuminating and worthwhile."

Another said:

"I have done NVQs and I hate them – ticking boxes, jumping through hoops, little thinking. This was academic and I liked it. We were treated as professionals and spoken to as adults. It was pitched at a high level."

When asked to describe what was not good about the course three participants said that the reading was difficult and there was too much of it, with one participant using the word overwhelming. This made the course seem heavy:

"...it made me wonder whether I had bitten off more than I could chew... I found it difficult to pace myself."

As expected participants found that much of the literature was new to them, particularly to those without a background in careers work. One said that it would be useful:

"...to have a checklist to tick off. Knowing what's the minimum I need to read – read A, B, C and D and the rest are extras for supplementary reading."

However, the reading material was generally found to be interesting and stimulating.

When asked about the difficulties they had experienced a range of responses were given. Most participants said they had found managing the course whilst working challenging, and experienced some difficulties in getting everything done (e.g. reading and assignments). One person found the structure of the course confusing and one other had difficulties finding references for their work. One participant said that she felt it did not suit her learning style, as she felt that she was more practical than academic.

Comments on the quality of the course materials ranged from *'brilliant'*, *'first class'* to *'quite relevant'*, with *'really comprehensive and really interesting'* also included. However, one person said that the load was heavy with another commenting on the large amount of theory in the first module and the lack of it in the second.

Learning technologies

All the participants found the Blackboard site easy to use and generally user friendly. One person commented that some documents were not easy to find, as they were not in an obvious place. Again the comment was made by one person that they found the amount of information on Blackboard overwhelming. The participants used the Blackboard site in varying amounts; some said they used it a lot, particularly during the first module and others used it in a more focused way around assignment deadlines.

There was a variable response to the usefulness of the discussion boards on Blackboard. One participant liked them, but others found them false and would have preferred face-to-face discussions. Two participants raised important points regarding confidence issues in relation to this. For example, in relation to their contribution, one person said:

"...you write, send it and it's set in stone. I suppose it's to do with confidence. Is anyone going to be interested in what I have to say?"

whilst another said:

"In module 2 I thought I would use the discussion boards, but I didn't. I didn't want to sound like I didn't know what I was talking about."

Support and assessment

A range of responses was received from the participants regarding the group meetings. Most felt that they were very good and very useful and appreciated and one described them as

"really supportive and motivating"

and

"I wouldn't have done the assignments without them."

People commented on the way the tutor came with an agenda, but was flexible to meet the needs of the people in the group and created an environment:

"...for us to be open and honest and say what we felt."

One participant commented on the attitude of the teachers on the course:

"I didn't like the attitude of the teachers. Flippant and blasé. I know better"

and said:

"...it was better after all those who dropped out went."

Another participant said that they would have liked more structure to the meetings and one also said that the meetings could be condensed into a morning.

In relation to the assessed work most participants said they felt well prepared following the group meetings. One participant said they felt more prepared for the second assignment than for the first:

"I had no gauge as to whether I would pass or not."

Another participant did not feel well prepared for the first assignment, and by the second had become very involved in all the reading, so:

"I spent two days cutting it down, as I had done so much. I definitely felt more confident by this time."

Both assignments were found to be appropriate and relevant and participants liked having a choice of tasks. The Module 1 assignment was described as:

“incredibly necessary’

and

“foundational’

whilst the Module 2 assignment was said to be:

“absolutely relevant. I had something already that I could use.”

One participant said:

“...the first assignment was relevant to the stage of my professional development and was really useful. I have been in the same school for two and a half years and now I have the background I know what should be going on. It gave me the ammunition to go back to my school.”

On a disappointing note the participant also said:

“My careers co-ordinator was invited to do the course but didn’t.”

The importance of detailed and constructive feedback was highlighted and all participants commented positively on the feedback they received and felt that it was constructive in pointing out areas for development. One participant said:

“The comments in the margins were like you were having a conversation. I really liked it, it felt personal and that my work was valued. I knew where my weaknesses were and if I’d had to do it again, I would have known exactly what to do.”

The following points were made in relation to things on the course that could be changed; more group contact time, allocated study time, a professional library, a study room and studying alongside teachers throughout the course. Some final points raised were the need to warn people about the level of the course and the commitment needed. One participant commented:

“...new people doing NVQ don’t seem to get this.”

Unfortunately during the review it was only possible to speak to one of the participants who withdrew from the course. Their reasons for withdrawal related to the way in which the course was explained at the outset and their view of their own needs in relation to professional development. It was described as:

“...a short course to help me work more closely with my careers co-ordinator. I wanted to do this, but I was in no position to do a year’s course. I was persuaded to come along, but it was far too much for me. It was not enhancing what I did and not right for me. I wanted a short course.”

Some concluding recommendations and remarks

The evaluation showed that the way in which a course is introduced is vital to motivation to study and the likelihood that participants will complete successfully. Those who were asked to do the course and did not wish to participate dropped out in the early stages. In addition, the person who thought it was a short course also dropped out because it did not fulfil her expectations. The most disappointing aspect of the study was that the innovative idea of having PAs and teachers studying together and becoming forces for change failed, in that only two teachers started the course, and both dropped out. The reasons for this are somewhat unclear, due to the lack of participation on the part of the teachers in both the course and the evaluation. However, one possible reason could be a lack of a culture of CPD amongst the schools, in contrast to the vibrant CPD culture within the partnership.

In promoting a course (whether it is by e-learning or not) it appears essential to present accurate information, including its academic nature and to work with volunteers rather than conscripts. It is vital to recruit participants to the programme who are actively interested in doing the course and wanting to develop themselves within the professional CEG arena through an academic course. Drop-out can be expected to be high if people are asked to undertake the programme when they do not want to do this of their own accord. In addition, it is important to consider the learning styles of the participants. One participant said that she felt it did not suit her learning style, as she felt that she was more practical than academic. Another said:

“...the information we were given in advance was lacking. Some felt bullied or pushed into doing the course. That’s why there was a big drop-out rate. It’s only fair to tell people that there’s a lot of theory. It was fine for me, but not for everyone.”

In order to make information on the course accessible to prospective participants, the university could run a familiarisation session with staff who are interested in the course. This would give people the opportunity to see the materials, try the Blackboard site and have a discussion on the academic nature of the course with the course tutor.

Such a session done well could do much to dismiss any fears about using the technology. Study time for participants is necessary if they are to gain the maximum benefit from the course, and additional non-tutor led group meetings where participants undertake activities in the course materials together could also be considered. The evaluation showed that the reading on the course should be prioritised for participants, with an indication of what is essential and what is recommended as non essential further reading. This has led to the production of a checklist to help participants understand the structure of the course and to enable them to check their own progress. In some cases this is coupled with a course calendar giving the relevant group meetings and deadlines for assignments. In addition some further work has been done in order to make references to literature easy to find.

In conclusion, participants were asked to summarise how they felt about the certificate course and it was described as valuable, enjoyable and interesting by several people. All participants were glad that they had had the opportunity to do the course and it was described as

“high up on the interest and relevance meter. It really made me think about stuff because it’s academic”

“glad I did it” but also “glad that’s it.”

One participant said:

“If I ran the organisation everyone with an operational role would be on it.”

In relation to the lifelong career learning of the participants, it was clear from the work submitted that all course members engaged in a deep level of thinking in relation to their professional practice. They constructed knowledge in relation to CEG and gained relevant skills and understanding. In addition, however, they also reflected on their own career experiences and development and since successfully completing the course one person has been promoted within the partnership into a role that they feel they would not otherwise have gained. However, lifelong career learning lies at the heart of CEG policy and practice and the lack of interest on the part of the teachers towards their own CPD as manifested in the study is surprising, if not somewhat disturbing. One has to question how such professionals can hope to encourage young people to take a proactive approach to their career learning and development when they appear to lack enthusiasm for their own.

It is clear that those people who completed the Certificate course found it very valuable. However, one of the aims of the course was for PAs to study alongside the careers co-ordinators from their schools, and as only two teachers signed up for the course and they subsequently withdrew this was not achieved. Neither of the two teachers took part in the review, so it is impossible to know at this stage what they would have wanted from the course, or indeed if they actually wanted the course at all. In this respect Connexions training managers need to continue to find out their views on this matter, to make sure that the needs of careers co-ordinators are being met in other ways. In this respect it cannot be said that lifelong career learning is for all or that e-learning provides an answer to everyone’s CPD needs. In spite of this, the PAs who completed the course spoke of being better equipped to develop CEG within their schools and had enhanced their own professional development in the process. In this respect the course should be viewed as successful, whilst having identifiable areas for improvement.

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