Getting 'stuck-in' to the right kinds of technology

Alastair Clark *suggests that simple, low-cost technology can be most effective in developing e-learning.*

Information Communications Technology (ICT) has not just fuelled globalization. It has also, in careful and creative hands, enabled the development of some very effective personalized and localized experiences. This is particularly true in the area of adult learning.

NIACE has been working with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to lead in a programme to promote the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in Adult and Community Learning (ACL). Developing e-learning for adult part-time learners has particular challenges. Adult learning provision is often based in outreach locations or borrowed buildings where access to equipment is very patchy and the learners arrive with widely varying experience in the use of technology.

Innovative e-learning projects

The LSC programme includes a range of measures including support for infrastructure and an E-Guides staff training programme. A particularly creative part of the strategy has been the funding for innovative and experimental projects using Technology to Enhance Adult Community Learning (spawning the acronym TrEACL!)

A total of 55 projects were funded in Rounds 1 and 2 (2003-4 and 2004-5), including activities such as developing online quizzes using simple free software called Hot Potatoes; an online course in Permaculture; use of simple digital cameras to record learner progress; use of iPods with blind learners; use of online web logs (blogs) for learners to post their work. (Source www.aclearn.net). Other emerging

innovative projects have used hand held computers, voice recorders and mobile phones.

It is the nature of experimentation that some TrEACL projects have been more successful than others, but evaluation is key and some of the least successful projects have actually provided some of the most useful 'lessons learned' reports. A clear theme emerged from all reports; 'appropriate use of technology to enhance learning was key to success'. The better results were often obtained using simple low cost solutions which were 'fit for purpose'.

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The first round of TrEACL projects was evaluated by the Learning and Skills Development Agency and they found that 'there was no direct link between amount of money spent on projects and the impact on learners' (Atwere and Donovan, 2004), pointing out that some very innovative practice had come from modest funding.

World Summit on the Information Society

While adult educators in England absorb the TrEACL messages, the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is being prepared for November 2005. The first phase in Geneva in 2003 set some very grand aims and high expectations that ICT would be harnessed to meet the development goals of the UN Millennium Declaration including: eradication of poverty and hunger; universal primary education; gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; combating disease: HIV AIDS, Malaria; environmental sustainability (WSIS 2003). This places no small expectation on ICT as a force for good!

Exploring approaches

There has been a recent flurry of enthusiasm (The Economist 2005, Heppell 2005) in placing a focus on hand held devices in general and mobile phones in particular as having a key role to play in overcoming the 'digital divide' especially the divide between nations. The Simputer, a low cost, portable alternative to PCs (www.simputer.org), is another example of an initiative to develop hand held accessible technology and John Traxler, University of Wolverhampton, has explored the use of mobile phone text messaging to support teacher training as part of a larger project in Kenya.

Digital Solidarity Fund

The Digital Solidarity Fund (www.dsf-fsn.org) has been proposed as a practical measure to support the WSIS. The controversial plan was to fund infrastructure in countries of the South through a 1% levy on all public telecommunications contracts. The Fund was finally launched in March 2005 but with the levy downgraded to a voluntary contribution.

It remains to be seen how much finance the Fund attracts to work towards the goal of telephone and internet access to the estimated 1.5 million villages currently without connectivity (International Telecommunications Union, www.itu.int/home/index.html)

Appropriate technologies for adult learning

The WSIS sees ICT as contributing to solutions to range of world problems. If this is to work it will require many adults learning *about* ICT but also learning *with* ICT. It is also clear that every hard won dollar to go towards digital inclusion needs to have maximum impact. Exactly how this will be done can not be predicted but we can be confident that there is nothing quite as creative as technology in the hands of people with an appetite for learning and a thirst to communicate!

References

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Heppell S (January 2005) 'Post PC?' Edu@guadian, Education Guardian,

World Summit on the Information Society (December 2003) 'Declaration of Principles 2' www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html

Additional websites

Generation Cyb (29 November 2003) 'Les dons des ordinateurs au tiers monde en question' (Donation of computers to the third world placed in question) www.generationcyb.net/article.php3?id_article=247

ISIS: An NGO dedicated to women's information and communication needs, www.isiswomen.org

World Changing: A web site with models, tools, and ideas for building a bright green future www.worldchanging.com

Alastair Clark is Development Officer, National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) AlastairC@niace.org.uk