Incorporating e-learning into a Local Government Authority Context: Evaluating Developers' Perspectives on the Learning Ladder Project

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the evaluation of an e-learning project. The Learning Ladder developed a number of e-learning modules for local government staff on recurrent working practices. The modules feature the use of short video clips as a means to support and encourage organisational learning.

We report on one part of the evaluation: namely, the qualitative analysis of data from developers. We focus on three aspects: developers' perceptions of video clips for learners to reflect upon examples of working practices; their perceptions on the role of e-learning for a consistent approach to organisational learning; and perceptions on developing a learning community.

Findings suggest there is value in video for capturing authentic practices and for creating consistency in representations of organisational policy and practice. However our findings suggest the organisation has only made limited progress towards creating a learning culture.

Keywords

Evaluation, video representations of practice, organisational learning

INTRODUCTION

Access to the 'working knowledge' within organisations is crucial for organisational growth and development. Understanding this working knowledge is intricately bound to an understanding of organisational practices and the organisational culture. Gaining an understanding of organisational practices and the working knowledge bound to practices can happen for staff in a number of both intentional and unplanned ways: eg through discrete training; by observing others; by reading a manual; by listening to the experiences of others; and sometimes by attempting to perform or participate in the practice oneself (though with the inherent possibilities of failure or problems occurring).

Furthermore, gaining access to working knowledge can be extremely difficult for new, less experienced staff, since working practices can be highly complex and are often underpinned by highly contextualised organisational knowledge (Schon, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It can also be very difficult for experienced practitioners to articulate their working knowledge, to make that knowledge available for inspection and for sharing: both with less knowledgeable practitioners in their development and for developing a learning community within the organisation.

Efforts to address these problems of access to working knowledge and to understanding working practices have led to a number of action research projects into the use of multimedia communications (eg using digital video clips in networked learning environments) to create representations of working practices that attempt to render working practices into usable and understandable forms for sharing in professional development contexts (eg Goodyear & Steeples, 1999). Multimedia technologies have been found to offer innovative ways to allow practitioners to create, share, critique and reflect upon representations of problems, derived from real-world practices (Steeples, 2003).

AN OUTLINE OF THE LEARNING LADDER PROJECT AND THE EVALUATION STUDY

Representations of real-world working practices have been developed as video clips in an e-learning project run within a local government authority context. The use of the clips is aimed at improving working practices and at developing a consistent and ongoing approach to organisational learning. This e-learning project is called the

Learning Ladder. The Learning Ladder project was run by Lancaster City Council with funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)[1] as part of the Learning Pool initiative of the Improvement and Development Agency.

The Learning Ladder project has developed a number of e-learning modules for council staff on recurrent working practices, including absence management and customer care. The modules have been developed to complement and integrate with existing in-house training and development activities. The modules feature the use of short video clips as a means to support and encourage organisational learning by:

a) allowing learners to access representations of authentic procedures and practices (such as formal disciplinary interviews) that are normally confidential and closed or private; and

b) providing learners with rich and visually explicit examples of good and less good practice in key organisational functions. The examples are available for learners' inspection, comparison and reflection, and thereby, to promote discussion of the practices illustrated in the clips with working colleagues.

The local authority context is a relatively new arena for the application of e-learning and the project team was anxious to see an evaluation study as an integrated component within this development project. The project team wanted a formative evaluation ie one intended to enhance the use of the Learning Ladder modules, to optimise their quality and to go forward in the development of further e-learning actions within the organisation. The evaluation was commissioned by Lancaster City Council and involved two principal external investigators, the authors of this paper.

This paper reports on one part of the evaluation study of the Learning Ladder: namely, the qualitative, comparative analysis of data gathered from interviewing key personnel involved in the development of the modules, to evaluate their experiences and perceptions from designing, developing and implementing the e-learning modules. In particular we focus on three aspects in this paper:

a) the developers' perceptions of using video clips in the e-learning modules for helping learners to access examples of working practices and for reflection on those practices;

b) their perceptions on the role of the modules in the development of a consistent approach to organisational learning;

c) their perceptions on the role of the modules in the development of a learning community and creation of an ongoing learning culture within the organisation.

THE EVALUATION WITH LEARNING LADDER DEVELOPERS

Methods and descriptions of developers' roles

For the evaluation study, we interviewed five developers involved in the Learning Ladder. The developers were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were recorded using an audio cassette player and the tapes were transcribed for analysis. The questions presented to the developers concerned the following aspects: their roles in the project; their views on the project successes and limitations; their views on the pedagogical approach informing the design of the e-learning modules, including the video clips; their views on whether the project goals and objectives were in accord with organisational goals and objectives; their criteria for assessing the project successes; and their views on how the e-learning modules could be further improved.

[1] Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Creating sustainable communities

The developers were as follows: the Learning Ladder project manager, the current and the former leaders of the training unit responsible for the project, one of the unit's face-to-face trainers and the key external developer based in a theatre company (the theatre company were commissioned to professionally produce the video clips used in the modules). All these developers had been involved in identifying or supplying content for the modules, as well as in design decisions about the presentation of the material. The length of time for involvement in the project varied from six months to throughout the project ie over the project's complete duration of two years.

Developers' experiences and perceptions of authentic practices in video clips

The developers were in agreement that the video clips were both easily accessed and provided a range of examples of visual representations of recurrent working practices, some of which were critical issues in staff

development and critical for improving organisational performance. The video clips represented 'role plays of real practices', involving both actual council staff and some professional actors. All developers regarded the quality of the videos as high, evidencing a professional production level. Bates (2005) believes that for learning to take place, video materials have to be carefully designed following sound instructional principles as well as good production principles.

The video clips offered a range of good through to poor examples of working practices for the learners using the modules to use in comparison. The clips had specifically been created so that the learners were not presented with polarised examples, ie as just one good and one poor example of each practice: rather, they included more tenuous examples that were not immediately interpretable as poor examples of practice (though these ones did have fundamental flaws for the learner to identify). The videos were valued for their role in encouraging learners to interpret practices and sensitive decision-making processes as they occur, especially as the clips presented very open-ended situations.

The developers also generally regarded the video clips as emotionally engaging: by presenting rich and visually stimulating representations of practice, over and above presenting the information and procedure or process of the practice in a static form, such as in a training manual. In addition, the combination of visual and aural media also allows learners to gain insights into behaviours and attitudes expressed though tone of voice and non-verbal gestures.

The developers were also confident that the video clips would be valuable for the development of communication skills and for confidence building in the learners by allowing the learners to explore aspects of practice in a safe and non threatening manner before actually engaging in the practice, in the real world. This was particularly pertinent in respect of the video clips of disciplinary procedures where everyone agreed it was critically important that the actual interviews need to be conducted in a procedurally correct manner.

The video clips were felt to be well aligned to organisational policies and procedures by the developers, because they represented a range of examples of actual practice and had been developed from organisational policies. They were also valued for providing continuing access to consistent examples of local government procedures that learners could revisit and reflect upon as well as being a resource for trainers within the organisation to reuse in other, blended learning situations and adapt to a range of training and learning purposes.

> perhaps the most promising advantage of e-learning is that it provides the possibility for sharing and reuse of learning artefacts. This increases the economic benefits of e-learning (Koper 2005: p72)

The value of the video clips as perceived by the developers concurs with assertions made by eg Bates (2005):

> Video is rarely best used as the prime medium for delivering large quantities of information … video is much more valuable for providing deeper understanding and for developing skills of analysis and application of ideas (Bates, 2005: p104)

Bates (ibid) has identified a number of aspects of video to make its use compelling for learning situations and that accord with the Learning Ladder developers' goals for the use of video in this project. These include video's ability to bring resources to the learner not possible through any other medium including being able to emulate near- or direct-experience. Video is also able to present a dynamic event. It enables the learners to visualise through illustration in concrete examples especially abstract concepts or normally closed practices such as one-to-one interviews. Using video, argues Bates, helps the learner in considering 'application' not just in comprehending a situation, practice or process. Furthermore, it helps the learner to analyse and reflect upon a situation, especially when differing versions of a situation or practice are presented to the learners for comparison.

The main weakness of video in instructional contexts according to Bates is its lack of interactivity, that is its lack of opportunities for the learner to actively participate. This suggests an assumption that watching a video is a passive activity, yet the learner can be cognitively engaged and stimulated while watching.

The permanent nature of the clips also means that the learner could watch the video many times, while reflecting on what is seen in the clips. One of the developers emphasised the pedagogical value of the video clips as being related to their role in reflective learning and this is in accord with earlier research on using video for 'stimulated recall' for reflection (eg Steeples, 2003). The developers also felt this ongoing access to review the materials was closely aligned with attuning individual performance to the overall business performance. Providing staff with examples of a range of good and less good practice in recurrent working practices was felt to positively influence individual performance by encouraging staff to reflect upon and reconsider their own current practices.

The role of the modules for consistency in working practices and for developing a learning organization

One of the overarching claims made by developers about the Learning Ladder modules is their ability to provide a consistent presentation of key local government policies and practices, rather than being subject to differing and individual interpretations and preoccupations eg of trainers in training workshops. This was felt to be crucial in order to achieve consistency in organisational practices, as well as to improve understanding of organisational practices and improve staff performance particularly in areas of concern among senior management such as absence or sickness management and staff appraisal. The notion of presenting the council's policies and procedures in a consistent manner to new members of staff was especially highlighted.

The modules were also viewed positively for their role in challenging management-related issues faced within the organisation through a development undertaken by the training and development function. The modules were seen as targeting important learning issues but by doing so were raising the profile and the central role the training and development function could take in tackling critical organisational issues. Furthermore, the e-learning modules were seen to be creating a positive impact about the organisation through an innovative, contemporary approach to learning and ongoing staff development eg in the use of the digital video clips and in provision of access to the e-learning materials through the organisational intranet. One developer claimed the modules offered 'a fantastic way to tie the organisation together quite neatly'

The project manager also emphasised the role of the project and the modules in attempting to develop a learning community. He suggested the modules provided opportunities for enhancing organisational communication such as through encouraging group discussion and reflection on the modules. The ease of availability of the modules, being accessible on the intranet by all members of staff, was integral to this move towards creating an ongoing culture of learning within the organisation at both individual and group levels. Rosenberg (2001) argues that through e-learning there can be a shift from seeing learning as associated with specific training events to seeing it as culturally integrated and ongoing, eg with access to learning materials and learning opportunities at anytime and from anywhere.

Critical success factors for e-learning adoption, according to Frazee (2002) include articulating the benefits of e-learning to both learners and senior management, providing strong leadership, through demonstration of management commitment and support, and by ensuring the availability of the relevant skills and knowledge needed.

However, in line with Rosenberg (2001), the Learning Ladder developers suggested there was both overt and covert resistance to e-learning within this local authority context. Rosenberg emphasises the 4 'C's required for e-learning to prosper. These are firstly that there is a culture of learning. Secondly, that there are champions to lead the development work. Thirdly, that communications are in place to promote the value and benefits of e-learning. Finally and at least as crucial is the need for an integrated change strategy to be in place to bring all these aspects together. We examined these aspects of culture and change in moves towards the development of a learning organisation in discussion with the internal Learning Ladder developers.

The developers revealed that the notion of a learning culture is still very much in its infancy within this local government context. The longevity of the products of the project was identified as a criteria by which to judge the success of the project but could also be an indicator of acceptance of e-learning as an integrated and ongoing approach to staff learning and development.

The developers were also aware of the need for champions to lead the development work. The project had grown from the council's response to a unique funding opportunity and as such had been developed and supported by senior personnel. However the task of project leadership was highlighted as an area for improvement and there was wide agreement in the need for the project to have a higher status within the organisation. Indeed, one developer emphasised the need for more positive promotion of the project and of e-learning.

The project had grown from a unique opportunity of external funding and would not have occurred without this funding. In other words, the project was subject to finite funding over a discrete period of time. One developer highlighted the need for e-learning to have a higher profile in the organisation, beyond the enthusiasm of developers and to be recognised in the organisation's ongoing business plan if it is to be sustained. This clearly concurs with Rosenberg's view on the need for an integrated strategy.

The organisation was also described by developers as operating in a largely decentralised manner with different functions operating in separate, sometimes competing and unrelated ways. This suggests difficulties for creating a fully integrated organisational community and by consequence, the difficulties for integrating learning as an ongoing feature within the organisational culture.

Issues in organizational readiness for e-learning

To fully embed e-learning in an organisation is clearly reliant on 'organisational readiness' to do so. Rossett (2002) identifies the following requirements for organisational readiness. She refers to the need for an appropriate infrastructure; for an e-learning strategy; for adequate resources; for a culture that encourages learning; and the need for senior management enthusiasm and support.

Rossett goes on to assert the need for 'culture building' by placing responsibility for learning with line managers, creating unity in the training or development function, integrating learning directly into work, through good design of e-learning and by rewarding the learner in their work for using it. She emphasises the need to create a culture of learning and teaching, removing perceptions of learning as a perk (where it is seen as time off from real work) and by making access to learning and learning materials easy. Our evaluation suggests that the Learning Ladder project has only been able to make limited progress towards these requirements.

Rossett (2002) also highlights the negative influence of the views of resistors who see change and new developments especially of e-learning as eg high risk, not making sense, causing short term costs but with only a vague sense of long-term gains. She also claims any integration which is done from the traditional classroom perspective will distort and minimise the value of such development and thereby allow scepticism to be further confirmed and innovation stifled. The Learning Ladder evaluation suggests there is resistance even among the development team and we believe this may well be connected to concerns among face-to-face trainers to protect their own traditional role. This resistance manifested itself particularly by an emphasis on the value of adaptation and reuse of just parts of the e-learning materials for traditional face-to-face training events.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented aspects of the evaluation of the Learning Ladder project, focusing on data gathered from interviews with the project developers. We have focused particularly on the perceived values associated with using video clips for capturing representations of working practices and making those representations available for reflective learning and group-based discussion. We have also been interested to explore how the developers have attempted to use the project and its products to promote the growth of a learning organisation: eg by using the e-learning modules to promote ease of access, and continuity of access, to learning materials for reflection and ongoing discussion; as well as by promoting the value of the modules for a consistent and effective approach to staff development, particularly around sensitive and often closed recurrent working practices, not normally accessible for development purposes.

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