E-learning for the careers profession: what are the lessons for the use of IT in the delivery of IAG?

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The increased use of online services for Information, Advice and Guidance has been paralleled by changes in the ways in which careers practitioners access their own continuing professional development. This article offers an evaluation of e-learning and blended learning experiences, which reinforces the importance of socialisation in learning. This paper concludes that such enhancement in learning may be limited in online advice and guidance services, reducing the opportunities for challenge, motivation and broadening of aspirations in some cases.

Introduction

Reduced availability of funds for continuing professional development for careers professionals, particularly those based in educational establishments, has in many parts of England meant the gradual erosion of in-service training (INSET) programmes. Once a well funded, essential support for the often isolated and marginalised careers coordinator; INSET has now disappeared in some areas and is sparse in others. In many areas, schools are now charged a fee by Connexions partnerships, or Youth Support Services, as funds are not allocated for such provision in their budgets. Although considerably diluted by legislation (Education Act, 2011), careers work and the careers profession are currently in a state of transition. The Careers Profession Alliance (to become the Career Development Institute) launched the professional register earlier this year and this has mobilised many of those working in or on the margins of careers to reconsider their training and professional development. These changes, coupled with the opportunities offered by technology, have fuelled the development, and in some cases further development, of e-learning or blended learning courses in my institution, Canterbury Christ Church University, and in other Universities.

Concurrently, such opportunities for flexible access have of course also been embraced by government under the new arrangements for the provision of career guidance as, in some areas, largely a replacement for face-to-face services. Certainly the internet is for many young people and adults, the first and perhaps preferred source of basic information on careers or educational and training opportunities. However when this is extended to advice, and particularly to guidance, many in the guidance community are concerned.

In this paper I explore some of the feedback from e and blended learning courses to see if there are any lessons to be learnt about the benefits and possible limitations of these models. Can we learn something about learning FOR career development (clients and service users) from experiences of learning ABOUT career development (professional development)? Although it could be argued that accessing information and advice through the internet is not the same as engaging in a learning process, I suggest that this may be precisely the problem. Should we not be maximising all opportunities to enable young people to learn; about opportunities, about the world of work and about themselves? My aim in this paper is to explore possible further developments in e-learning and blended learning opportunities. However, I would also hope to encourage a broader debate about what
current e and blended learners can tell us about their experiences, and what this might tell us about the wisdom of increased reliance on technologies for career information and learning for young people and, most crucially, for guidance.

E and Blended Learning

E-learning could be described as an electronic version of distance learning. In the early days of our first e-learning course this was indeed what it was. Instead of materials being posted to learners to read, they were made available on our virtual learning environment. In addition to reading there were activities suggested such as having a discussion with a group of learners or reviewing a policy document. A discussion facility for learners to talk to each other about what they have read and done, and an embedded email system also allowed direct access to other learners and a personal tutor. Reflection was therefore encouraged, but initially not insisted upon. In 2010 a further requirement was added to the end of every unit of work: the writing of a short reflection on that unit, and its relevance or links to practice. Prior to that additional requirement it had been commented upon that unlike a taught course ‘the only thing we actually have to do is pass the assignment’. No register of attendance was taken or insistence that learners engage in discussions with each other or reflect on what they have done or read.

The model used in the initial design of the course was Salmon’s five-stage framework (Salmon, 2000; 2002) and this has proved helpful in the further development of our e-learning and blended learning courses. The stages in this model have resonated throughout:

Stage 1: Access and Motivation is developed and is key for many who are not able to attend an equivalent taught course.

Stage 2: Online socialisation is built into the early stages of the course, as learners are asked to complete an induction exercise that asks them to consider their own career; sharing their reflections with other learners on the course.

Stage 3: Information exchange is encouraged through discussions relating to specific tasks and readings.

Stage 4: Knowledge construction is enabled through reading, exploring frameworks and legislation and considering their relevance to the work place.

Stage 5: Development of the learners’ continuing professional development is encouraged, with reference to professional associations and lifelong learning opportunities.

However, although online discussion and information exchange was an integral part of the course not all learners engaged with it. The optional nature of such engagement, and the reticence of some, meant that important stages of e-learning were not experienced by those learners. Bassot observed (2008) that for some e-learners posting thoughts on a discussion board was uncomfortable and engagement with others through such a medium was held back by lack of confidence, ‘I didn’t want to sound like I didn’t know what I was talking about’ (2008: p37).

Blended learning was a natural extension of our centre’s experiences of e-learning. It had been noted that individual and group tutorials, when available, had been wholeheartedly welcomed in e-learning courses. Feedback suggested that these ‘helped to provide a structure and rigour’ to the learning process, and the forging of relationships between learners encouraged conversations to be maintained in online discussion forums. Providing a broader range of learning opportunities enabled those with different learning styles to participate in the course more effectively; reading, doing and reflecting could be extended to include discussion, sharing of experiences, group work and the introduction of more active learning opportunities. In addition the reliance on the use of discussion boards, although still available, was lessened. From the perspective of the tutor I found the most important aspect was the chance to challenge ideas, assumptions and approaches to careers work. In particular, issues such as gender and cultural stereotypic roles and aspirations required discussion in order to review engrained notions of what is possible and, at its most basic, what ‘career’ is all about.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the learner experience for both e-learning and blended learning I used two
approaches; both of them qualitative and interpretivist. A qualitative questionnaire was made available on the VLE for the courses and learners were invited to complete it and email it to me. In addition I conducted two focus groups; one with an e-learning group and one with a blended learning group. During the focus groups, notes were taken and shared with the group at the end. The same questions that were on the questionnaire were asked in the focus groups. Six e-learners completed the questionnaire and nine blended learners did so. The focus groups were made up of 20 blended learners and four e-learners.

Questions posed were largely open, inviting ideas and experiences rather than grading or ranking. Bell (2010) explains that the way in which questions are posed in a questionnaire has a considerable impact on the nature of the data collected. Some of the questions did invite some ranking, e.g. ‘which aspects of the course did you find MOST useful?’ Others presented an opportunity for the learner to reflect on their own experience of the course, e.g. ‘how did your experience of this course impact on your role or professional practice?’ ‘Are there any further comments you would like to make about your experience of the course or approach to learning?’ Some questions were focused on information needed to further develop or modify the courses, e.g. ‘What was your highest qualification before beginning this course?’ ‘In what way did this impact on your learning or engagement with the course materials?’

The ways in which questions were responded to in the focus groups were of course quite different. Bell (2010) reminds us that in focus groups the researcher must be wary of more dominant members of the group overwhelming the data and also that the researcher becomes ‘less of an interviewer and more of a moderator or facilitator’ (p.166). In the focus group of e-learners this was not such an issue, but in the larger blended learning group I was aware of some individuals speaking more than others and so at times asked specific questions of specific people. Furthermore in a focus group, Bell (2010) points out that discussion is facilitated between members and therefore certain issues or areas of interest can have a higher profile than those raised by other questions. I was also aware that over the term of both courses a relationship had been established between myself and both groups, and so I was clear that this may have had an impact on the answers given. In the focus group there may also have been a reticence from learners who had criticisms or concerns about the course.

Data analysis

The motivation for engaging in either course was overwhelmingly related to their own professional development. ‘I heard that the new CPA say that everyone working in careers will have to have at least a level 6 qualification and this was the only way I’d be able to do it.’ ‘I realised I was managing people better qualified than me!’ The learners’ engagement with discussion boards during their course was generally poor. ‘I haven’t yet but I will.’ ‘I just want to get on with the course and finish, so if I don’t have to I won’t.’ ‘I would if I had some deadlines or some reason to.’

This feedback related well to Bassot’s findings (2008). Nervousness and lack of confidence about engaging with and contributing to the discussion board had prevented them from doing so. Consequently e-learners who did not have the opportunity to meet in person with other learners may not have shared ideas, talked to others or reflected effectively on their learning. Blended learning students really valued the opportunity to talk to other learners on taught days. In response to the question about what they had found most useful they answered, ‘sharing ideas and thoughts with others’, ‘the chance to talk about what we do and why we do it that way’, ‘talking about the reading. I found this quite hard and only really got it when we went over it together. That’s probably just me because I haven’t studied for a long time…’ In response, another member of the group said ‘oh yes I’m the same. I really liked the reading, but some of them were quite difficult so it was good to talk it through here.’ ‘I thought the theory bit wouldn’t have much to do with what I do at work but actually I found it did, ‘cos I talked to other people who do things differently and that made me think’.

Both e-learners and blended learners reported that their engagement with their courses had a considerable impact on their practice, although there were exceptions (as in the final quote here). ‘I think I understand better why we do what we do and maybe
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ways we could do it better’ (blended learner). ‘I found it really interesting. I don’t think we do enough stuff about the longer term. Now I’ve looked at it we mostly do things about the next choice like A-levels or UCAS’ (e-learner). ‘Not really. It’s good to know that what we do is probably right. Not sure that the theory bits are relevant to our unit. I’m still waiting to find out something I don’t know’ (e-learner who did not engage in discussions).

Both sets of learners also seemed to feel that a tighter structure and strict deadlines for tasks to be completed would help their time management and motivation. ‘Although I know that at level 7 we should take responsibility for our own learning, I do think that if we had to complete certain readings by a certain time and comment on it in the discussion, I’d be more likely to do it’ (blended learning student). ‘Maybe if we had to work in pairs through the site I’d get to know that person and be more likely to discuss things with them’ (e-learner).

Both structure and socialisation emerge as being very important for online learning. Salmon’s stages 2, 3 and 4 (2000; 2002) although built into the course structure, could be adversely affected by a reticence to engage socially online. It may be that some of the ideas suggested will be adopted in order to strengthen these aspects of the courses. Moving on, how might this help us to consider the use of technology with regard to Information Advice and Guidance itself?

E-based information, advice and guidance

Most of us do not hesitate to turn to the internet when we need information. Whether that is to explore holiday destinations, the best price for consumer items or symptoms of medical conditions, most of us will look online or at least start there. Using these three examples I would like to consider the advantages and possible disadvantages of doing so.

First the family holiday; what is Crete like in July and how much will it cost me? In the pre-internet days the first step for many of us would be a trip to the travel agent. Using online travel services is a very different experience. It is quicker (sometimes) and certainly easier (mostly) and it can enable us to save money by choosing unpopular or off-season options or travel times. However we are only able to enquire about the destinations that we know about. Who will suggest alternatives that might suit our interests better or introduce us to a part of the world that no one we know has visited? How will we know that we could afford to visit Sri Lanka when we had assumed that it was outside our budget?

If we want to find out the cheapest place to buy a specific lap top or other consumer product, the internet really comes into its own. It can search for retailers and compare and contrast prices, product packages and after sales service. If you know what you want and you have handled it in the ‘real world’ somewhere, you cannot lose. If you have no ‘real world’ experience you may indeed get the best deal but the wrong product.

The third example is that of medical symptoms. NHS Direct can be useful to check symptoms, rashes and treatment options. It has been a great success and may have reduced the number of people queuing up to see their over-worked GP. However, follow-up interventions are not always successful. A significant minority (26%) in a study by Byrne, Morgan, Kendall and Saberi (2007) failed to act on the advice given without personal face-to-face conversations. Those of us who have used it will know that for the vast majority of enquiries there is a default setting; if you are worried or if symptoms persist, talk to your GP. For the worried well, a headache can seem like a brain tumour. More importantly however for the busy, embarrassed or those in denial, they will not get the opportunity to ask the passing question as they leave the consulting room, ‘by the way doctor, I’ve had these strange dizzy spells…’

Are these parallels with career guidance services fair or useful? In all three examples above the key objectives were to access information. An educational or careers related example could be accessing information about the entrance requirements for a specific college or university course. Even within a face-to-face guidance interview such information sources can be invaluable for their speed, accuracy and ease of access. However such information is unidirectional. Such use of online information does not
challenge, question or guide the questioner. The client is not encouraged to consider alternatives or venture into hitherto unknown or misunderstood areas that may be potentially within their reach. Moreover those who prefer not to think about future transitions or choices, those who put off such considerations until the very last minute may remain unsupported. Like the e-learners or blended learners who did not engage in discussion or dialogue, information may be delivered, but learning is not necessarily also achieved.

Online and telephone guidance as opposed to information may offer more opportunities for necessary challenges and broadening of ideas, but it is unlikely that non-verbal cues or nuances will be recognised.

Returning to the evaluation of e-learning and blended learning, analysis strongly suggested that online interactions were not as comfortable as face to face discussions. It was these elements in blended learning that were most valued and during which learning was consolidated and related to practice. If this is the case for those engaged in learning on a course using technology, can we extend such observations to suggest that a reliance on technology in the delivery of careers education and guidance for the majority of young people in England is fundamentally flawed? Clearly this depends upon the level of service required. Sampson et al (1992) developed a differentiated model of service delivery. The first level of service in this model is access to information and other ‘self help’ services. However the next levels, staff assisted services and individual case-managed services, including guidance, require a more analytical and exploratory approach. As well as a process of exploration, challenge and broadening of horizons, guidance also relies upon learning; about self, about opportunities and about decision making. Law’s Community Interaction Theory (Law, 1993) concurs, emphasising the importance of recognising a range of influential factors in career development but all involving interaction with others. Learning, as we know from Vygotsky (1978), is constructed through social interaction. His description of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) for an individual; the distance between what can be achieved on their own and what can be achieved with help, illustrates that progress cannot be achieved without interaction with another. This was echoed by the e-learning and blended learning students whose progress was made more effective when they engaged with each other and with their tutor. Without such interaction, or when learners resisted the use of online facilities to do so, learning was not as helpful or meaningful. It may be that young people are similarly reluctant to engage in the personal learning and reflection necessary in career guidance online, as opposed to that which social interaction enables in a face to face interview.

Nevertheless, before reaching any conclusions about parallels between these adult learners and guidance services for young people, the differences must also be considered. The most obvious is the difference in age between the two and their experience of online socialisation. Young people interact socially using the internet all the time. They text, tweet and chat on Facebook, maintain friendships and make new ones online with ease and without the self consciousness experienced by some of the e-learners. However this is self selecting and self directed and so perhaps does not have the challenge or access to previously unexplored possibilities that talking to someone can offer. One of the strengths of face to face guidance is the reflection that it encourages. Such non-reflective interaction may not achieve more than information (or knowing) and this Schön warns us can be problematic;

knowing in practice can have a negative effect as it could lead to a parochial narrowness of vision…resulting in a tendency to become selectively inattentive to phenomena that do not fit the categories of his (sic) knowing in action.

(Schön, 1983:26)

Conclusion

It is clear that in depth research into the impact of online, telephone or limited access to one-to-one guidance will be needed in the coming months and years. Quantitative measures of drop-out rates from key stage 4, post 16 and higher education may provide some indications, but that will only tell us what has happened, not why. We have yet to see the impact of changes on the quality and profile of careers education in schools in England. If this is ameliorated by developments in the curriculum, then it may be
that the need for face-to-face guidance is in some ways offset. If personal learning and development is effective within the curriculum then information, online or otherwise may be adequate. However if personal learning does not take place effectively in the curriculum and through social interaction and engagement, then I remain unconvinced that this will be achieved effectively through online alternatives alone.

References


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