

Strand 4: Networked Learning in Community Development

Paper 2:

Making Lifelong Learning Real: Reaching People the System Doesn't Usually Reach

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Summary

1. The Centre for Lifelong Learning at Brunel University has developed several initiatives designed to increase access and widen participation, to build success in learning and to support individual development/employability and economic regeneration.
2. Brunel's Lifelong Learning System is designed to make Lifelong Learning coherent and accessible to the individual learner whether at work or in the community. The system provides access to:
 - Information Communication Technologies, including video-conferencing
 - information, advice, support
 - an individual personalised mentoring system
 - self-auditing/self benchmarking tools
 - a system of logging and rewarding learning achievements, and action planning

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- a range of education and training programmes to suit individual needs
 - links to the Brunel Intranet, which allows SMEs and Individuals to work off-line
 - access to Brunel software for Skills Profiling, Key Skills and Project Management
3. The system is not prescriptive about learning methods: learning may be on or off-line, face-to-face, distance, distributed, experiential or taught. The special features are the systems for logging and recording learning achievements, the access to a personal learning adviser, the ownership of the log and the learning by the individual, the emphasis on self-management and employability. The system is also targeted at individuals and SMEs rather than the easier market of large organisations.
 4. Brunel Lifelong Learning is an integrated system which will inform progress towards the University for Industry and other Networked Partnership solutions. It has potential for national and global dissemination and implementation. Brunel is already working on several international projects which will use the system.

Rationale

Widening Access and Provision

- The Centre for Lifelong Learning at Brunel University, established in 1995, has developed several initiatives designed to increase access and widen participation, to build success in learning and to support individual development/employability and economic regeneration. A HEFCE grant in 1995 gave the impetus for the establishment of the Centre. At this stage, the strategy was fourfold: to encourage more people to come to Brunel for initial Assessment and Guidance, to offer them suitable short courses to prepare them for longer courses leading to qualifications, to develop some multi-media materials to enable some of this to be done at a distance, and to build a network, both electronic and real across the whole of the West London area, in order to link the key players and to make access real.

The Regional Partnership

A regional partnership was established, in a wide area of West London covering the TEC areas of West London, North West London and parts of the Thames Valley. The Partners are the 3 TECs with their associated BusinessLinks and Chambers of Commerce, the Local Authorities (including schools and libraries), the FE Colleges, Community Schools/6th Forms, Careers Guidance and Community Support agencies and representatives of Businesses. IBM is an active partner. Representatives of these bodies sit on the Centre's Steering Committee, which is chaired by the Chief Executive of the West London TEC. The partnership is in itself one of the notable features of the development.

Adding personal support to Distance Learning

It soon became apparent that the initial strategy of getting people to come to Brunel was not going to work for a number of reasons. It was too labour intensive, reached too few people, was insufficiently flexible and not suitable for people who worked and were unable to get away to attend a university. Our next step was to consider whether a distance learning approach might prove to be the answer. However, our research had shown that many distance learning courses (apart, of course, from the OU) lacked personal contact and support for the individual learner. This worked for highly motivated learners who were determined to get further qualifications: but we were trying to reach the people the system didn't usually reach, those who were not confident about resuming their learning, often because they had not succeeded in the past. These people were going to need considerable support and encouragement.

Personal Support Through Video-conferencing

So, how could we implement our original idea, that of providing initial guidance and support, but providing this support remotely? The obvious answer to this question was to explore the idea of video-conferencing as a way of providing both academic guidance and ongoing support to would-be

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learners and course participants. We approached BT, who were active partners in our project at this time, and explored the possibility of using ISDN VC 8000 personal video-conferencing technology to achieve this goal. We made good progress. BT's response was very positive. BT gave us a grant to get started, we installed systems within the University and with a number of partners, in order to practice and to become proficient and confident in its use. We quickly hit on another set of problems. There were not enough VC systems around and it was difficult to persuade people to use the systems. It must have been like that when e-mail started up.

So the video-conferencing part of the project did not really take off at this stage either internally or externally. It appears that we were ahead of the market. ISDN was regarded as too expensive (and it is now much cheaper, particularly with the advent of cable across parts of the country). It had not at that time caught on with many organisations, especially small businesses, who had not understood how much money they could save potentially with such a system. The equipment itself was expensive then: the price has dropped dramatically now. People also expected the technologies to improve and did not want to invest until they got cheaper and better: they said, though it may have been more of an excuse than a reason, that the technologies were not robust enough. And indeed, both the technologies and the quality of the picture have improved, but not really significantly.

We stopped and rethought again. We stacked our ideas, experience and equipment and waited for a more propitious time. That time is about ripe, as prices fall, the products improve, the market changes. We are ready to reintroduce video-conferencing, but this time as part of a much more comprehensive and flexible system. Ours was a single solution to a complex problem. Any solution, we realised, would need to be as complex and multi-variable as the number of potential users.

The Quest for a Market-Driven Multi-Solution

What we learned from this exercise was that the market has to be ready and prepared for any new initiative and the price has to be right. The solution has to be market-led, not supply-driven, used to high standards. We also needed to take a lesson from the providers of fitted kitchens who found out long ago the importance of customisation. Today's public does not want a set product of any kind. All solutions have to be tailored to the needs of the specific customer: in kitchens, this worktop, that door, this colour, that texture, this finish, that size and shape. We needed to be able to provide the same kind of flexibility and fitness for customer purpose for the purchasers of Lifelong Learning.

For these reasons, this strategy was reviewed and modified during 1996-7 in the light of experience. We surveyed the market we were trying to reach: SMEs and individuals, including the socially excluded. The results were not very encouraging to people like us, who believe passionately that Lifelong Learning is good for you. Basically, the UK SME culture is not a learning culture, not yet.

The Needs of Individuals and SME's

So during 1996-7, we went out and listened to people living and working in SMEs in Brent, to find out their views on Lifelong Learning. This market research into the learning needs of small and medium-sized businesses was crucial. The results were both discouraging and challenging. In small SMEs particularly, there was often a lack of overall strategy, or/and HR strategy, let alone an HR strategy linked to strategic goals. For them, the bottom line ruled. That meant that 'going on a course' was often seen as an expense rather than an investment. Only when there was an obvious link to the improvement of the company's performance was training regarded positively. Unfortunately, such links are neither explicit nor easy to make in most cases.

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SME Reactions to Lifelong Learning

In fact, the SME market is itself extremely complex and difficult to generalise about. Small organisations led and managed by bright young graduates have a different attitude from those organisations which have few or no graduates. People in organisations which did not normally employ graduates were sometimes somewhat 'anti' formal education and training, often having had negative experiences which had turned them off rather than on to learning. They were often unaware of the education and training opportunities available nearby, and not keen to go to a college or training provider of any kind. They regarded existing provision, rightly or wrongly, as insufficiently flexible, with content that was too rigid and timebound, which was not customised to meet their individual or company needs, was expensive and time consuming. They were in any case, too busy to go out to train.

Even more surprising, the use of Information Communication Technologies in such companies was very limited. Computers were used mainly for word processing rather than as tools for business management. There was a distinct fear of the INTERNET, either because there was a risk that employees would waste time and money surfing it, or because it might somehow penetrate company accounts/secrets and make them transparent. There was also a feeling of insecurity. The reality is that SMEs find it difficult to survive in today's turbulent and rapidly changing market. There is no such thing as an SME for life, any more than there is a job for life. However, the people working in these conditions do not seem to have grasped the significance of these facts in terms of their own future employability.

*To be employed is to be insecure,
to be employed is to be secure*

The painful truth of such a maxim is that employees (as well as the unemployed) need to ensure that they are constantly renewing, updating and extending their knowledge and skills if they are to go on being employable. Loyal service in a company, doing the same job for 20 years in the same company, is likely to render people unemployable should their company ever downsize or collapse. This applies of course to any organisation these days, even the previously safe professions. Even

apparently successful SMEs can never be sure what tomorrow's market may bring. They and their employees need to be prepared for this.

The Employability Agenda

The middle-aged executive/ worker who finds himself or herself without work at an awkward age (ie young middle age) is becoming a familiar figure. The sad part of this is that such a person may have done an excellent job, but if he or she has not kept his skills up-to-date, has not continued to learn new skills, has not changed job several times within the organisation, he or she is likely to find it hard to get a new job. This led me to conceive the idea of a Learning Log which would help people to keep for themselves their ongoing record of development, achievements, skills and qualifications. Such a log would ideally use Information Communications Technologies (thus ensuring that the users developed IT skills) and ideally it would include access to, information about access to, learning opportunities. Thus each person would build up their own record of skills for employability. Such a record could also be externally verified to give it credibility.

This led us to the idea of building a lifelong learning system. What had become very clear was the fact that the ordinary citizen who suddenly became interested in Lifelong Learning (for positive or negative reasons) would have a hard time finding any. Most people find the array of learning opportunities advertised totally confusing. Further, their route through this jungle of qualifications and learning opportunities is difficult to navigate. They could easily get lost, take series of courses which sounded exciting, but which didn't actually lead anywhere, spend a fortune and still not be qualified for that new job.

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The Lifelong Learning System

1. Location: any where, any time

Our research showed that we were correct in assuming that SMEs would not want to send people away on courses, and that they needed therefore to be reached in the workplace through the use of new technologies. But to make the move from a supply-led model to a demand-led model required the development of a system which offered multi-solutions rather than single solutions, was capable of meeting the CVE/CPD needs of people who could not attend courses in the University, was infinitely flexible and was able to use the delivery mode which was fit for purpose. In addition, such a system needed to offer that learning at a pace, place and time to suit the needs of busy adults, most of whom were at work and had very little time.

It also became clear from our research that SMEs had a particular need for access to CVE/CPD on-site, since most SMEs were too busy, too volatile and too preoccupied with the bottom line to invest in sending their people on courses of any kind. As SMEs now constitute some 90% of all businesses, this is clearly a market need to which HE has a responsibility to respond. Given that this is a fragmented market which is difficult to reach in an economical way, a solution was needed which was both effective and cost-effective.

2. The Mentor, Learning Adviser/Learning Manager

The idea of personal advice and support was key to our idea. Most individuals need some help and encouragement in steering their way through the learning maze, in 'benchmarking' their skills so that they can measure their progress, in finding and getting appropriate qualifications, in remaining motivated and focused, in feeling good and becoming more adaptable and employable. Some people need to be referred to a specialist agency such as Careers Guidance, others will need the minimum

of help. So we are not prescriptive about the Learning Manager, who may be real, virtual, on video-conference, on-line, on voice mail or fax.

3. The Electronic system

We finally chose a system which was cost-effective, robust, easy to install, and apparently low-tech. We were much helped in this by Fife College, Scotland, which had developed a telematics system which had some of the features we were looking for. IBM also gave useful advice and support. We have chosen to use a computer which is linked to the Brunel Intranet, which has pre-installed on it a number of key programmes and the LOG. Each learner has a password and secure file, kept on the server at Brunel. There are no installation costs for the user: simply a plug and a telephone socket. We recommend a dedicated computer to avoid traffic problems on the system.

4. Information and Business services

We are clear that most SMEs would not buy in to Lifelong Learning as a lone concept. Our research shows that the SMEs are very keen to use the Business /Information Services which we are building into the system.

We have also been negotiating a range of other services with major providers to ensure that the users get good value for money.

5. Brunel's Role

Rather appropriately for Brunel, our role is to invent, design and manage the system, to train support and quality assure the mentors, learning managers, to maintain the server and the help-line, to find and maintain the electronic library of resources, to act as broker and quality assurer for the programmes and services provided, to research the data-base and analyse take-up, quality assurance, evaluation and dissemination.

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6 The Current System

The result of this has been the development of a new system with a new approach designed to make Lifelong Learning (CVE/CPD) coherent and accessible to the individual learner, whether in business or in the community. The emerging system has the following components:

- the use of Information Communication Technologies, including video-conferencing
- an individual personalised mentoring system
- access to self-auditing/self benchmarking tools
- a system of logging and recording learning achievements
- 6 monthly (or less) target setting/action planning and review
- use of the distance learning backbone which records each individual's progress; counts numbers registering on the system, completing action plans, gaining qualifications; analyses background data so that research can be done on the users and the usage
- access to an Information Line, a Business Line and Learning Line. The latter provides access to a range of learning materials, on-line, off-line, distance learning packages and taught courses
- links to the Brunel Intranet, which allows companies and individuals to work inexpensively off-line in a managed learning environment, yet provides e-mail, Web and Internet connections if and as needed.

The Centre for Lifelong Learning is supported by a Widening Access and Provision Grant from HEFCE. The Centre is also working specifically

- in Brent with SMEs and with individuals on a Regeneration Project for Wembley Park
- across the region on an ADAPT project which has as its main target people in SMEs at risk of losing their jobs
- with IBM on an international project on Social Exclusion, Technology and the Learning Society.

The systems are in an advanced stage of development and will be ready for trial in summer 1998. The system is a framework built on networks and partnerships, which can be totally customised to the needs of the learners. Access is comprehensive.

Brunel Lifelong Learning is an integrated system which will inform progress towards the University for Industry and other Networked Partnership solutions. It has potential for national and global dissemination and implementation. Brunel is already working on several international projects which will use the system.