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by Gabriella Civico

E-learning
and non-formal education – making the connection

To consider e-learning it would be much easier if it were possible to show you online using our tried and tested Learning by Doing method. Since this is not possible I will use this article to describe to you what e-learning is, how it works, what it can offer the youth training sector, what the cost implications are and why I think it is a positive development for youth training delivery.

▶ What is it?

E-learning uses internet software to provide an online environment for training. This makes it possible for trainers and participants to communicate online from different locations, 24/7 (twenty four hours per day, seven days per week). In other words, wherever and whenever internet access is available.

Communication can be:
• 'Synchronous' in real time when people are online at the same time.
• 'Asynchronous' with discussion and debate building up over a period of time as contributions are made at a time convenient to each participant or trainer.

Have you ever wished, either as a trainer or participant, that you could arrive late to a training session and quickly catch up on what had been going on? With asynchronous e-learning where all contributions and comments are stored online, this is possible.

E-learning software provides online space for:
• group work.
• one to one contacts.
• links to websites and documents.
• possibilities for group writing of documents
• individual assignments.
• and much more...

Here's what some of the participants of the YEU e-learning Pilot Project said about e-learning when asked to describe how they felt about it after a few initial opportunities to try it out:

"when it comes to animals and e-learning for me the picture is pretty clear – a Zebra!. Not because it is black and/or white but :
- because it is something exotic but very real,
- because it is the same good ol' horse (education) but in a different shape/colour,
- because you need Internet for that and sometimes you are on-line (white) sometimes you are NOT (black) but it is still part of the Zebra... I said it, HAU!" (Marius Ulozas)

"animal is a TATOO (or TATU) (Australian small shell plate animal) because is exotic as any foreign animal (internet learning), because is plated (sometimes internet can be hard to get in from outside), but for the ones who know it is easy from the inside" (Mara Traistaru)
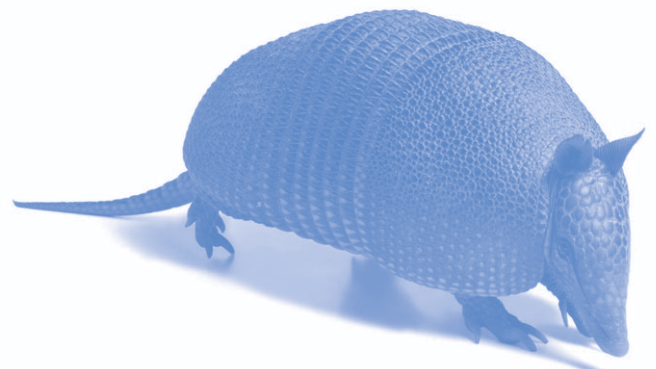
How it works?

Some third sector organisations have interpreted e-learning as using ICT technology for participants to individually interact with digital content online or on CD-Roms. This model using e-learning simply to digitally transmit information content fails to recognise and harness the full potential of e-learning for training. The challenge for youth organisations is to appreciate and exploit all that e-learning offers and use the ICT tools that other education and training sectors, such as Formal Education and Business, are using to good effect.

Regardless of the sector, training using e-learning has many parallels with some of the pedagogical characteristics of non-formal education. It uses both Social Learning Theory and Experiential Learning to underscore the importance of group learning, peer education and co-mentoring. This fact that the nature of e-learning is in tune with the core educational values of youth organisations and non-formal education is a factor that makes its adoption as a training tool in these fields a logical step.

E-learning offers additional opportunities for youth trainers and those wishing to learn, to communicate and to share experiences and expertise. It is a method of providing a space for contact between young people without boundaries of time and location. The only requirement is access to the internet and some basic ICT skills.

There are many versions of software that can be used for e-learning but, as with any training, in order to ensure that learning aims and objectives can be reached the e-learning must:
• Be well facilitated
• Use content appropriate to the learning environment and participants' needs.

What can it offer?

Using e-learning for training can increase learning outcomes in many ways. These key words highlight a number of them.

Equality Organisations can ensure that the quality of their training delivered at local level is equal for all.

Life – Long – Learning: This becomes a reality as training can be more easily adapted to an individual's specific needs.

Language Confidence in participating in a foreign language will be improved as the time to read and understand contributions and compose responses is increased when compared to a face-to-face alternative.

Engagement The learning process can be extended for participants in face-to-face training courses with e-learning either before or after the activity.

Access Limitations relating to cost, visas or physical disabilities preventing attendance at face-to-face events are avoided.

Recognition Institutions which formally accredit non-formal learning can have online access to the training process reducing their time and costs requirements.

New Knowledge The latest, most up-to-date information can be distributed quickly to both trainers and participants. Avoiding the need for re-printing publications also makes it a more environmentally-sustainable method for information distribution.

Intensity With 24/7 access to the training participants and trainers can work at their own pace at times best suited to them. The frequency of training opportunities can also be increased.

Numbers Travel and accommodation costs are eliminated meaning very little limitation on the number of participants or trainers that can be involved in any one training activity.

Geography The training sphere becomes truly global as geographical barriers relating to location, language or visas are removed.

Good initial and ongoing training plays a major role in realising and retaining a youth organisation's human resource potential. This can result in increased learning outcomes and higher membership figures. The ability to train youth leaders efficiently, effectively and continually - once the investment has been made in their initial training - is invaluable to organisations.

• **Best practice and methodologies**

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Using the principals of Peer Training, Co-mentoring and Communities of Enquiry e-learning will enable youth organisations to manage the existing knowledge throughout the organisation more efficiently and effectively. E-learning gives training the potential to become truly lifelong as co-mentoring using e-learning becomes a normal part of the youth leader's tasks.

In contrast to peer training where there is an intrinsic difference in knowledge and experience between those doing the training and those being trained, the underlying principle of Co-mentoring is that those involved have similar knowledge 'levels'. Working on the premise that everyone can continue to learn, explore new ideas and continually assess old ones; co-mentoring gives the opportunity for people to share their good practice and any questions and challenges they may have with their co-youth workers around the world.

It is likely that the potential answers and responses to challenges can be found from within the wealth of experience and expertise that other youth workers have. Sharing knowledge and experience in this way will increase the overall quality and efficiency of delivery in the non-formal youth sector as a whole. E-learning platforms have the capacity for discussion and illustration of questions and solutions and can provide a space for development of new ideas and initiatives in a structured and supported way.

▶ Financial Considerations

There are both fixed and variable costs that must be calculated for any e-learning programme. For voluntary organisations, in particular, costs must be looked at both in relation to:
• Internal cost implications for the organisation
• Costs which volunteers themselves at grass roots level must meet.

For many organisations the introduction of e-learning would mean a radical shift in approach concerning the allocation of financial resources to training. This could mean in the short-term a re-alignment away from training events and publications towards staff time in the analysis and amendment of pedagogical processes for achieving learning outcomes online.

The use of free or cheaper generic Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) as opposed to individually-designed platforms will also keep costs low. Open source software however such as Moodle must not be mistakenly seen as a 'free' option. Whilst the software is free, its development into an actual user-friendly interface is not, and paid professionals are usually needed for this task.

An organisation must take time to evaluate what technology they have available, or can be made available and is acceptable to the membership. Consultation with both volunteers and staff will prove vital in choosing the most appropriate investments in hardware and software for e-learning.

The technology to enable the use of e-learning, together with the training in the use of that technology, are major considerations for expenses related to the introduction of e-learning. The training requirements for the trainers in the pedagogical processes intrinsic in effective e-learning must also be prioritised and budgeted.

For youth organisations there are obvious savings in travel and accommodation costs. Savings will also be made in the time needed to be committed by the volunteers to receive their training both in terms of amount and also the point in time when the training must take place. It can be argued that e-learning can result in some costs, for example those related to hardware acquisition, being passed onto the participants. It is possible however that obtaining access to suitable hardware to undergo training may be a more acceptable cost to volunteers than finding the extra time needed to attend face-to-face courses.

It can be foreseen that expensive and time-consuming face-to-face training will be reserved for learning objectives strictly requiring the intensive interaction only possible in such contexts. Other learning aims and objectives can have training programmes designed to meet them using e-learning.

Ensuring that the investment in e-learning has been properly planned and prepared for will do much to ensure that the investment proves to be a success. The cost of not introducing e-learning, and harnessing the potential that ICT has to offer for improved learning outcomes could prove more costly than the investment required to work through the process described here for the effective use of e-learning.

In Conclusion

The failure to meet the training needs of vital human resources can result in an organisation failing to operate to its maximum potential. The challenge for the non-formal education sector is to ensure that the training requirements for their youth leaders can be met using techniques and procedures that can be successfully integrated into volunteers' already busy lives.

E-learning can compliment traditional face-to-face training or even completely replace it if it proves to be the best option to achieve the required learning outcomes. It is unlikely that e-learning could deliver all the training needs of an organisation and it will often be the case that training by e-learning sits alongside face-to-face training. The provision of blended learning in this way will most efficiently meet the full spectrum of training needs of an organisation. This may mean that e-learning is used to deliver training that has previously been handled on a face-to-face basis or that it makes new training possible for topics and people that were somehow previously excluded.

There is a growing need for flexibility of training opportunities on the part of both learners and trainers, requiring new approaches to training in terms of frequency and duration of training activities. This is especially important in order to continue to attract volunteers from population groups that perhaps due to time or mobility constraints have not traditionally been involved in non-formal education. E-learning can contribute to this new reality and youth organisations can be at the forefront of the development of this innovative form of training for the Third Sector.

Pilots

Throughout 2007 several pilot e-learning training initiatives with youth organisations were conducted. The full conclusions and results including recommendations for good practice with advice and guidance specific to youth organisations considering using e learning for training will be published and available from early 2008.

The initiatives are as follows:

WOSM (World Organisation of the Scout Movement):
With 7 international offices at different locations around the world the potential of using e-learning for staff training is being explored. Information, support and training about e-learning is being provided to National Scout Associations. E-learning is being piloted as a way to train volunteer leaders around the world.

YEU (Youth for Exchange and Understanding):
E-learning is being employed as a way of providing on-going training and support to participants following training events and in preparing participants in advance of face-to-face training.

NUS (National Union of Students, UK):
This pilot is a new training initiative delivered wholly online on Trusteeship and Good Governance. Participants are student representatives in universities throughout the UK.

Spectrum (Christian Youth Work Training, UK):
The e-learning being developed here is training on 'How to Learn'. The e-learning programme prepares learners for the non-formal education nature of their youth leader training programme.

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