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Covid-19 Resilience Plan for the post-16 sector

Basic principles in designing blended learning
programmes

July 2020

Introduction

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, Wales went into 'lockdown' in March 2020. Over the next few months, staff in post-16 sectors started to experiment with different technologies to develop a range of ways to deliver teaching, training, learning and assessment at distance that most suited their learners. The post-16 sectors and learners have learned many lessons from this period about what has not worked well, and what has worked well and what post-16 sectors may wish to retain in their practice.

As we move forward, it will be necessary for post-16 sectors to plan for the 2020/21 academic year and beyond. We anticipate that most learners will return to onsite teaching and learning from September, but it will be of the utmost importance that post-16 sectors put contingency plans in place. These will be of importance so that should it be necessary to lockdown in a particular area, or across Wales, teaching and learning can continue as far as possible without interruption.

During lockdown, post-16 sectors placed an appropriate emphasis on supporting their learners' and staff wellbeing, as well as trying to continue to provide learning. However, in many cases, courses understandably became fragmented in delivery. In future, post-16 sectors will need to focus on providing courses and training programmes that are well planned and coherent to provide learners with a quality learning experience, whether courses and training programmes are delivered fully face-to-face or delivered through blended learning. It is not always possible, or desirable, to move provision usually delivered face-to-face onsite directly into blended learning. Therefore, staff will need to review the courses and training programmes they deliver to ensure that they have a suitable blending learning course and training programme in place should they need to use it.

This guidance has been developed in consultation with our Blended Learning Working Group, including representatives from Joint Trade Unions, Estyn, Jisc, NTfW, Colegau Cymru, Qualifications Wales, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, National Centre for Learning Welsh, Further Education institutions, Work-Based Learning providers and Adult Learning in the Community partnerships.

Designing blended learning

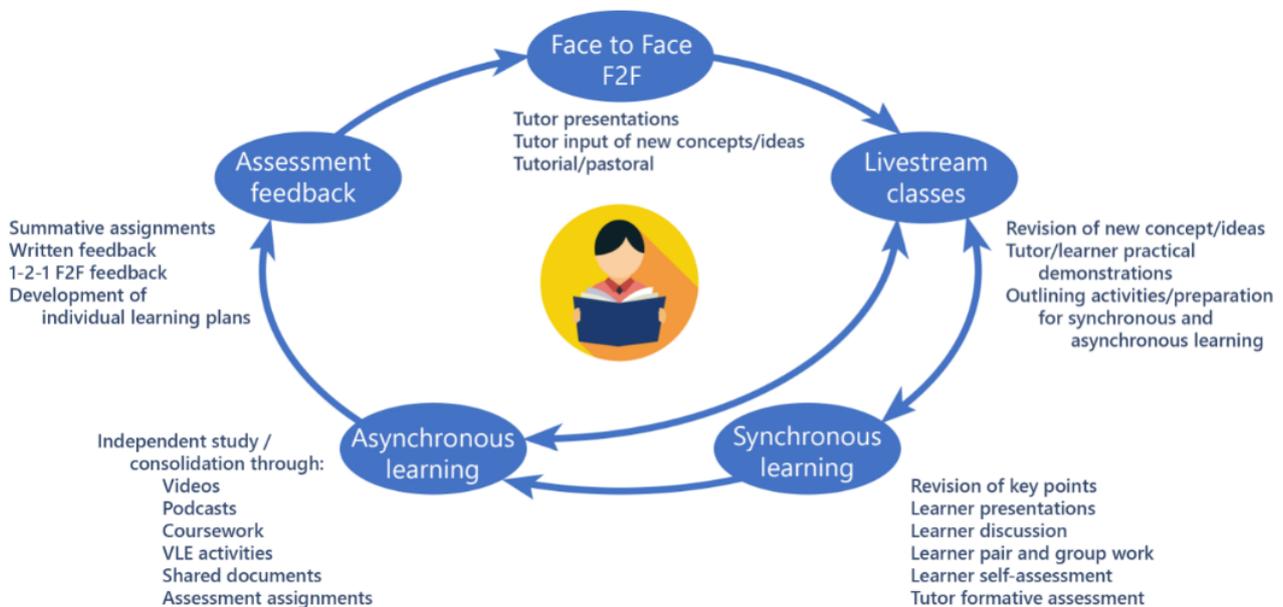
At its simplest, blended learning is a combination of onsite face-to-face learning, synchronous learning¹, asynchronous learning² and assessment for, and of, learning at distance. The comments that follow are not exhaustive or prescriptive. They are offered as suggestions to help staff consider the steps to take to produce coherent blended learning courses and training programmes. Post-16 providers will need to adapt blended learning design and techniques taking into account the nature of their learners; for example, the needs of work-based learners will be different from those of adult learners in the community. However, the key issue for all sectors is to ensure that they design courses and training programmes that will work effectively to

¹ Synchronous learning refers to an online learning event in which learners can take an active part in real-time.

² Asynchronous learning refers to learning undertaken online, but during which there is no real-time interaction with other learners or the tutor.

produce quality outcomes using blended learning techniques. To this end, designing quality learning experiences that stretch and challenge learners needs to take precedence over choosing the technology through which to deliver the learning and training, and then choose the technology that best fits the delivery.

The blended learning development cycle



Step 1: Timing

- A first step is to consider how long the blended learning course or training programme is going to take. Further education and adult learning in the community courses are timed in usual circumstances as being a number of sessions over a number of weeks when the course is solely onsite teaching.
- Learning in a blended learning scenario means learners will need a clear indication of how long the course will be overall and, in particular, how much time staff expect learners to dedicate to the asynchronous learning part of the course.
- This will be particularly important where the courses are part-time, because learners will often need to schedule in other work, study or care commitments alongside their blended learning. In addition, learners in receipt of certain benefit payments need to know their expected study commitment in order to check that they meet the criteria for such payments.

Step 2: Guidance

- Staff will need to produce guidance, which gives learners a clear written indication of the overall learning aims and objectives for the overall course or training programme, as well as specific learning aims and objectives and the assessment criteria linked to the grading system and the marking policy for each unit/module.
- Staff might set this out in a course handbook for learners, or set it out at the beginning of the course and of each sub-section.

Step 3: Sequencing

- Placing the learner at the centre of their thinking, staff will need to consider the different modes and sequences for delivery and assessment of the content in blended learning.
- In the model shown on page 3, it assumes that the sequence of delivery will start with onsite face-to-face teaching. This is particularly important for learners who are new to a course, training programme or a provider. It gives learners an opportunity to meet the staff and others in person before working online together. It also allows staff to find out learners' level of digital skills and connectivity and to find out whether any learners need assistive technology or additional support with their learning.
- An initial face-to-face session enables staff to make presentations of, and about, the work, introduce new concepts and ideas and find out about any pastoral issues before learners work online. As the second face-to-face session comes round in the sequence, staff can expand the use of the session to revise learning as necessary.
- A face-to-face session when there is no lockdown may happen at weekly intervals. However, face-to-face sessions during lockdown may happen at longer intervals; for example, one face-to-face session every two or three weeks and the other mode of teaching and learning delivered in sequence with this. When an area, or Wales as a whole, is in lockdown, it will not be possible to provide face-to-face learning. In these cases, staff will need to use synchronous learning sessions to replace them.

Step 4: Teaching and learning techniques

- In planning the course or training programme or sub-sections, staff should take into consideration how to make learning as active as possible for learners.
- Staff will need to carefully plan how long these sessions last and when they take place, particularly to accommodate learners who may be studying while in employment. These sessions may need to be shorter than usual sessions to ensure learners do not suffer from 'screen fatigue'.
- Staff should provide a clear outline of what their plan is and the learners' part in the session at the beginning, for example, whether they should take notes, write down questions that occur to them, make notes of new vocabulary related to the subject that they later research.
- Live streaming provides staff with the opportunity to build on the presentations and introductions to concepts and ideas they have made in onsite face-to-face learning or as part of independent learning activities. They can use demonstrations to enhance ideas previously presented and pose suitably challenging questions to stimulate and stretch learners' thinking and preparation for synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

Step 5: Synchronous sessions

- Synchronous sessions provide good opportunities for consolidation of learning through such activities as learner presentations, learner discussion, learner pair and group work, and formative and learner self-assessment opportunities through such things as quizzes.
- Synchronous sessions may need to be longer than livestream sessions to provide opportunities for learners to engage in pair and group work.

Step 6: Asynchronous sessions

- Asynchronous sessions provide opportunities for learners to consolidate their learning through a range of means; for example, independent study through videos, podcasts, course work, virtual learning environments (VLE) activities, shared documents, assignments and assessment.
- It is important that the staff provide a written overview of the work learners will complete during asynchronous learning and state the approximate time that it should take the learner to accomplish the work. This helps the learner not to over or under work on the material. The description of the work may be usefully 'chunked' providing the learner with an initial idea of the learning objectives they should achieve by the end of the section and engage the learners in activities, such as reading, researching, organising their learning and views, writing assignments. It is helpful to follow the learners' activity by providing notes about the key points learners should have learned from undertaking that 'chunk' of work.
- Staff will need to plan these sessions as if they were delivering them face-to-face and ensure their written descriptions of the work learners should tackle is suitably referenced through hyperlinks or resource banks. This provides parity. It helps learners access the materials they need to study more easily and not waste precious study time.
- Staff should ensure the work is sequenced and differentiated sufficiently to challenge learners appropriately.
- Part of asynchronous work may be to undertake written assignments or projects that learners submit for summative assessment and grading. Staff need to provide clear guidance about how to submit work, dates by which to submit work and by which learners will receive feedback and outcomes.

Step 7: Assessment

- Regular assessment and providing feedback/feedforward focussed on stretching and challenging learners will continue to be important elements of a learners' experience if they are to make steady progress.
- Staff should create opportunities at regular intervals for learners to self-assess their own learning and receive formative assessment. However, in most cases, at the end of the sub-section of the course or training programme, there will need for opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning through summative assessment.
- Receiving clear and regular feedback that reflects the effective practice of an analysis of areas for improvement, suggestions how to improve and stretching and challenging targets will be of greater significance for learners working at distance.
- Staff can enhance the written feedback with a supportive face-to-face, or telephone, call to discuss the comments made and to agree with the learner an individual plan for how the learner can move improve and any additional assistance the learner may need.

Step 8: Technology

- Staff will need to look back at what they have planned for the course or training programme and now make a decision as to the best software to deliver the teaching and training that will work with the hardware learners have. (In certain sectors, it may be that the providers will have made decisions about which software is to be used across the institution, in which case staff will need to take account of this.)
- There are many different software packages available through which to deliver learning, but it is advisable to ascertain the level and competency of the staff's and learners' digital skills, to 'keep it simple' and to use one or two software packages that all learners can access and use competently.
- In making decisions about which software and platforms to use, staff will also need to take account of audits of practitioners' and learners' needs and abilities to access software. However, overall the technology chosen should support, not determine, the teaching or training. The danger in not doing this is that too much time may be lost trying to make a range of packages work properly detracting from valuable learning time.

Support and guidance

Developing learners' distance learning skills

The suggested model above can be adapted dependent on the situation at the time, the design of the learning and the needs of individual learners. The most important thing is that staff communicate to learners how the course will work and expectations of learners from the outset of the course.

Learning effectively at distance requires different skills to learning in a face-to-face environment. Many learners take to distance learning easily: others find it much more difficult. The main skills a distance learner requires are good time management skills and the ability, and space, to work independently, as well as the ability to use technology effectively. Therefore, while planning a blended learning approach, it is important to help learners understand at the start the conditions and skills required for learners to successfully engage and make good progress in their learning.

It is helpful to provide learners with written guidance and an opportunity to discuss how they might need to organise themselves, in particular, in relation to participating in livestream classes and synchronous learning, as well as ensuring they manage their time and space effectively to complete the asynchronous learning. Learners may not live in circumstances that allow them much privacy when working synchronously online, or a space to work effectively asynchronously in the home environment. They may need suggestions and support as to how to overcome these problems.

Supporting staff wellbeing

It is equally important to provide a good support system to help learners when needed. However, for staff's wellbeing, it is important that staff let learners know at the beginning of the course, when and how they are contactable and what time span

learners can expect an answer to their query. For example, this might mean stating in the learner handbook that learners may contact the tutor between certain times of day during the working day and that learners may expect, for example, a twenty-four hour turnaround in answering any queries. There should also be guidance about how learners can contact other services; for example, if they cannot access the system or they need financial help or need wellbeing support.

Leaders may wish to provide institutional guidance to staff about the above issues to ensure what is stated and expected is in line with staff's contractual obligations.

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