

Silver Surfers at Ealing City Learning Centre

Ealing City Learning Centre (CLC) provides specialist ICT teaching and learning for schools, teachers and local community groups. Three people contributed to this case study:

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Tags:

ACL, Re-engagement/inclusion, SEN/LDD inclusion, EAL, ICT, City Learning Centre

Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Engaged and empowered learners

Sectors:

ACL

Innovation

The course, for 'Silver Surfers', is a specialized beginners and intermediate ICT course designed to meet the needs of older people in the community. It caters for a wide age range (60 to 85-plus) and accommodates mild to moderate disabilities and different prior learning levels.

Background

In a mixed-age class, the specific learning needs of older people were not being addressed. Older people have specific requirements relating to the pace and style of lessons, the length of lessons and break times, the times of day at which classes are held and the need for more repetition and consolidation of learning. They may also experience difficulties with keyboard skills or manipulating a mouse, or with sight, hearing or mobility.

At the Ealing CLC Silver Surfer classes, up to 12 students are taught together once a week during the day time. Their skill levels are assessed by a tutor. Extra learning support is available for individuals, depending on the level and type of difficulty encountered.



Technology

Standard PCs and keyboards are used. Apart from some adaptive features, the equipment and the software is no different from that which is widely used elsewhere. The course aims firstly to familiarize older people with keyboard and mouse skills, as many have no prior experience, and then with e-mail, Internet, search engines, word processing, graphics and digital images. For this reason, practice between lessons is strongly recommended. The course is intended to raise confidence and skill levels in use of everyday technologies, as well as enabling older people to conduct online transactions such as purchasing, banking and corresponding, or to pursue creative and educational interests.

Teaching and learning

The beginners' class is more 'structured' than the intermediate class, where more independent learning is encouraged. A certain level of language skills is required as one-to-one language support is not available. However, the main issue is that for many older users, the ICT Vocabulary has to be learned. The visual language of ICT is taken for granted by younger people, but older people have little prior experience.

Pedagogically, ICT is used to open a gateway to other areas of learning. Through the internet, social and communicative skills are enhanced. An example was given of a student in her eighties who had learned to communicate with her son and grandchildren in Australia, using email, photographs and webcam technologies. Much of this new confidence and independence has come about because the course is organized around the needs of older learners for a secure learning space and peer encouragement. When older people were put with younger learners, tutors noted that if they didn't know how to do something, they asked the younger person to do it for them, instead of having a go themselves.

Impact

Learning how to use ICT raises self-confidence and self-esteem. Older people report having 'hit the nail' with the new technologies. Others have been helped to 'conquer their nervousness'. Staff report that once older

people get to the CLC, they realize that ICT is a tool for making lives easier in terms of independent living. It enables them to shop online, find out what their entitlements are, research family history and keep in touch with relatives abroad. Some students come as part of an established friendship group.

"You might ask, how is this different from a coffee morning? The advantage of ICT is that it gives much wider access to social networking for a generation who have not been brought up to new forms of communicating."

Gina Reeves, Curriculum Consultant and Acting Manager

Another important impact is that school-resistant adults are enabled through ICT to learn in a different way.

"If your previous learning experience was poor, it inhibits learning. ICT can restore confidence and reawaken an interest in education."

Teaching and learning with new technologies has led on to other interests, such as design, graphics, or photography.



"Older people do not live so much in the virtual world, they want something tangible. They like a product – a card they have designed, for instance."

The course tutor reported a marked progression rate: the majority of beginners go on to intermediate. Some have expressed interest in other learning, such as digital photography.

Challenges

A number of challenges have been raised by course staff.

Older, susceptible learners are alerted to bogus emails or fraud, but they are thought less vulnerable than young people to 'predatory aspects' of the Internet.

Students who drop out only tend to do so because of health issues. Ninety percent stay the course, but there is a problem with catching up missed classes, hence the emphasis on between-session practice. The challenge for some older people is access to a home computer.

"There should be more leveling of access for those over 60, especially those who've retired. If wireless hubs, which are free of charge from home, can be trialed

for schools [in a named London borough] this should be more widely rolled out."

Gina Reeves

It is feared that some older people who are not prepared for digital switch-over will now find themselves excluded. Government policy to deliver more education through home devices may therefore be compromised.

Miniaturization of technologies has resulted in the loss of a significant market amongst older people. For people with sight problems, larger-scale mobile phone technologies need to be developed

Wider Adoption

There is limited capacity at the CLC to run more Silver Surfers sessions. Demand exceeds supply, with a waiting list, but there are barriers to wider adoption.

The question of delivering the course remotely, e.g. through a Virtual Learning Environment, is not under consideration for a number of reasons, including resourcing and support.

Older people who attend know that they have to be able to practice, preferably on their own PC with internet access. Public access computers or internet cafes are currently inadequate or lack appeal.

Technology needs a re-think – in particular, mouse design has not moved on. The design of some mobile devices is now less user-friendly for older users.

