Paper 3:

Stockton-on-Line (SoL) - a Case Study

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Summary

- The partnership "Stockton-on-Line" (SoL) was established in 1997 between University College Stockton (University of Durham), the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees Education Department, Stockton and Billingham College of Further Education, on Demand Information plc and Comcast Business Solutions.

The aim of the project, as expressed in the bid for ERDF funding was follows-

"to widen participation in adult, further and higher education by students who traditionally do not participate in education beyond school age. Particular target groups are people in socio-economic classes D, E and C2. The MORI adult education survey (1994) has shown that 70% of people in socio-economic class DE and 56% of people in socio-economic class C2 have not engaged in education since leaving school. Young unemployed men between the ages of 18-25 and women returners are also considered to be important users of the project."

Stockton-on-Line aims to be the major source of distributed education, training and related information and learning services for the whole community in Stockton-on-Tees. The project represents a real and unique example of cross-sectoral collaboration in lifelong learning in a dynamic and fast-changing environment where partners have genuine difficulties of interest to resolve, particularly where their understanding of their own traditional learner markets are concerned. This paper will develop a case study of the project from inception to the point at which the first teaching materials are to be delivered by the system.

Stockton-on-Line -
A Case Study

The Region

- The Teesside area, like many of the so-called 'older industrial regions' of Britain has experienced high rates of economic and industrial decline, resulting in severe and prolonged structural unemployment. Participation rates in further and higher education are among the lowest in the country. Of course, Teesside's problems of low and non-participation in education and training mirror a national situation, where a direct causal link between poverty and unemployment and low educational achievement has been established for at least 15 years (DES, 1983).

The causes and indicators of social exclusion in the Teesside area, as elsewhere, are complex and derive from a number of factors. High rates of unemployment in the area, both male and female, are unevenly concentrated amongst particular social groups and specific geographical areas with strong negative impacts upon individuals, families and communities, and the decline of traditional family structures.

The Type of Project

- Stockton-on-Line is a cross-sectoral, collaborative project using community-based networked learning as a vehicle to encourage community development and to foster economic regeneration. The balance between education and community development in the project funding bid is 80% education and 20% community development. This is seen as an appropriate balance, and reflects the growing view among practitioners in community education of the limits to which education and training can by itself bring about regeneration (Johnston, 1997).

Whilst these are the overarching aim of the project, its more specific objectives concern the targeting of individuals and groups who have come to be regarded and described as excluded. Gordon's analyses (1996) of low educational achievement establish an indisputable link with poverty, unem-

ployment and lone parenthood. Additionally, it would appear that the proportion of lone parent families (usually female headed) is positively related to high rates of young male unemployment. Not surprisingly, these are also the groups identified by Kennedy (1997).

In this context, these are the groups within the communities of Stockton-on-Tees which the project hopes to reach. Targeting of these groups will be carried out using the strategies recommended by Kennedy. A value added factor in this respect is that a separate research project shortly to be carried out by the University will allow both teams to test the soundness and effectiveness of such strategies as postcode targeting.

The Vision

It is against this background that the idea of Stockton-on-Line was conceived. The Stockton-on Line project in its specific form came into being as a result of discussions among senior staff concerned with the potential of IT in three educational provider institutions within the Borough. The three providers were the Local Authority itself, through Adult Education, the College of Further Education and University College Stockton, which is a constituent College of the University of Durham.

Partners

The three educational institutions were all concerned in different ways with the generation of a wider educational provision within the community, the widening of access to that provision, and crucially, in the genuine widening of participation. The three partners sought further partnership arrangements with the private sector in order to build the project as part of the ERDF infrastructural arrangements.

Learners

As described above, this initiative will address the needs of non-participants in education.

Provision

The vision was of a different kind of educational provision, available locally , offering a seamless range of opportunity. The seamless concept was crucial to the vision – that the range of opportunity would be possible because it would draw on the resources of all three sectors, but that to the consumer, there would simply be a curriculum from which s/he could select what was appropriate and with which s/he could make progress in a self-directed way.

Infrastructure

At the heart of the vision was the concept of a network, of learning resources being delivered to the customer via a network which would be managed by or on behalf of the partners and which would enable learners to have access to the resources they needed. In parallel with the physical network infrastructure would be a human network, finding new ways to cooperate in bringing together the best educational curriculum for the area.

The earliest vision of Stockton-on-Line was that of a fully-fledged third generation distance learning model, based entirely on computer-mediated communication (Nipper, 1989). However, it is widely acknowledged that third generation models of 'virtual education' are actually difficult to find (Keegan, 1996; Hawkridge 1998). More typically are second generation models using an integrated multi-media approach, sometimes where print is the dominant medium. While it is not intended that print should be the main medium of Stockton-on-Line, the project has more of the characteristics of a second generation, dual mode model than any other. Moves towards the third generation will necessarily have to proceed from that base.

Project Outputs

- The community development and economic regeneration aspects of the project have already been mentioned. In this context some clear objectives have been set for the project. These include specified numbers of permanent and temporary jobs created over the project's funded lifespan as well as numbers of trainees. In addition, private sector funding has been secured and a commitment to improve an agreed number of community facilities.

These proposed outputs have been forecast on the basis of anticipated numbers of local residents gaining employment in running and maintaining the centres. It is also expected that a number of residents will move into employment after completing their studies. Some temporary jobs will be created through the installation and commissioning of the work.

Monitoring of these outputs will be undertaken by the Local Learning Centre Managers and co-ordinated by the Project Director. Overall monitoring of the project will be undertaken by the Project StrategyGroup.

Methodology for On-line Learning and On-line Support

- The design of a curriculum by three partner organisations presents a pedagogical challenge, since there has not been the opportunity for much open discussion about an aligned pedagogy; indeed there have been moments when, among the discussions of the curriculum planners, issues of pedagogical misunderstanding have arisen. This is at least in part due to the fact that none of the partners at present has experience of delivering the curriculum at a distance.

Tutor support

Learners in the project will be supported by a team of peripatetic tutors within the learning centres as well as through means enabled by the exploitation of the technology itself, for example by electronic mail with subject tutors and the use of a video conferencing facility. The roving tutor is central to the planning of the project and may well represent a different approach to pedagogy; these tutors will be focused on helping students within the framework of computer mediated distance learning; it will

follow that their own confidence in the use of the technology will have to be considerable. However, their prime focus will be on the student him/herself and in customer support. Given that the project is intended to deliver to non-traditional learners, some of whom will not hold teachers in high esteem, this will require considerable skill; sharing of skill and experience, as well as of information, will be essential in order to build an effective team to undertake this task.

Technology support

It is anticipated that centres will be linked by telephony to a central site, which is hosted by one partner. Here, help calls will be taken from students on a 9am to 9pm basis and will be routed from this hub to the tutors involved in the project. The project team will monitor the use of this service in order to find out where and when demand is highest, what the true nature of the demand is in order the better to plan for the future.

Software support

Further, choices in the area of curriculum software raise several interesting questions -

- What learning outcome is being pursued?

- What range of software is available to support this?

  How does the software under consideration fit with the desired learning outcome?

- What kind of pedagogy should the software support?

- What kind of staff development is required for those who will be expected to support the learner within the on-line medium?

- What monitoring/evaluation processes are required to identify developing issues of pedagogy which might lead to more effective learner support?

Since the target group will be expected to operate in distance learning mode for the majority of the time, the learning material will need to be organised and structured to meet learning requirements; here, issues of pedagogy must come to the fore. Since the project targets relate most closely to non-traditional learners, the anticipation is that the project will need to support materials which relate to basic skills. Much computer-mediated material exists in this area; it does not all however share a consistent view of learning. This dimension will need to be added by the local curriculum designers and be reinforced by the tutors working in the project.

Software shell

The software shell for the learning world which will be delivered to the partnership derives from an existing product, Link2Learning, developed by On Demand Information (ODI) in partnership with Park Lane College, Leeds. It enables tutors to organise materials so that a student can plot a track through a course, can share materials on line with a tutor, can submit material for assessment and can build up an on-line portfolio. In parallel, a distant tutor can provide additional material, give guidance and support through application sharing with a student, through electronic mail, or through voice communication. The application itself depends on a central host computer where learning resources are stored and which has discrete space for students' work.

Additional resources

The students will also have access to standard personal productivity software so that they can produce work at the computer in the Learning Centre.

Range of clients supported

Although the assumption, as mentioned above, is that there will be a number of students who will require assistance in the area of basic skills, this is by no means the only content which is anticipated. There should quickly be a range of NVQ courses, largely provided by the FE College and also some

courses which enable students to gain enough credits to access higher education; later, it is hoped that part-time degree courses can be supported by the electronic distribution of materials and support for students provided through Stockton-on-Line.

For the future

Learning town initiative

- Stockton-on-Tees is taking part in the Learning Cities initiative and has been designated a learning town. This will clearly identify a number of local learning-related agencies which will want to share and distribute information into the community – libraries, job centres, health agencies for example. There will be a need for an integrated directory service to manage all of this information and the links within it. The establishment of a managed web-based service should embrace all of these initiatives and enable more effective people networking, community development and learning. The experience of Stockton-on-Line in learning outreach should inform this wider development as well as finding a context within it.

Local Authority education development

In addition, the local authority is committed to developing communications and information technologies within its schools; this will take place during the next four years within the context of the National Grid for Learning; of itself, it will generate a training need among teachers for the uses of ICT and for the need to teach effectively on line. During this time a people network of skill and experience in on-line delivery will be developing.

Higher Education

The changed funding pattern for HE will mean that University College will seek to deliver some of its courses in distance or part time patterns rather than expecting the majority of students to live locally and attend on a full time basis. Experience gained through the Stockton-on-Line project in computer mediated delivery of distance learning

materials will enable a head start in the provision for part time students; the geographical locations of those students will not of course all be within the bounds of the current intranet arrangement; however, it would be anticipated that once the initial targets have been met and pedagogical experience in a range of support techniques for distance learning has been gained, the technology would be adapted to support learning over a much wider area, consistent with the existing HE pattern of sharing learning materials on the world-wide web, across the Joint Academic Network.

Further Education

The local Further Education College anticipates a physical removal within the next two years. It also has a vision of a curriculum congruent with the needs of the millennium, with new patterns of learning and with the need to deliver much of this curriculum using ICT. Stockton-on-Line should, by the time this change takes place, have enabled much pedagogical learning to take place; it should also have helped provide clarity about who and where learners are, and enabled a clearer articulation of the learning need.

Conclusion

- In educational terms, the impact of structural unemployment in Teesside has also brought with it a general loss of apprenticeships as a traditional route to skilled employment. As a result, educational qualifications have become the only real route to employability (Gordon, 1996). It is this employability, which research with potential employers in Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) suggests, which is increasingly valued in the complex employment market of the late 1990s. Indeed Watts (1996) suggests that "(job) security may now lie in employability rather than employment".

In this sense Stockton-on-Line offers a real opportunity to implement a radical educational initiative to achieve improved educational standards, community development and regional regeneration.

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FACE no. 8 Winter