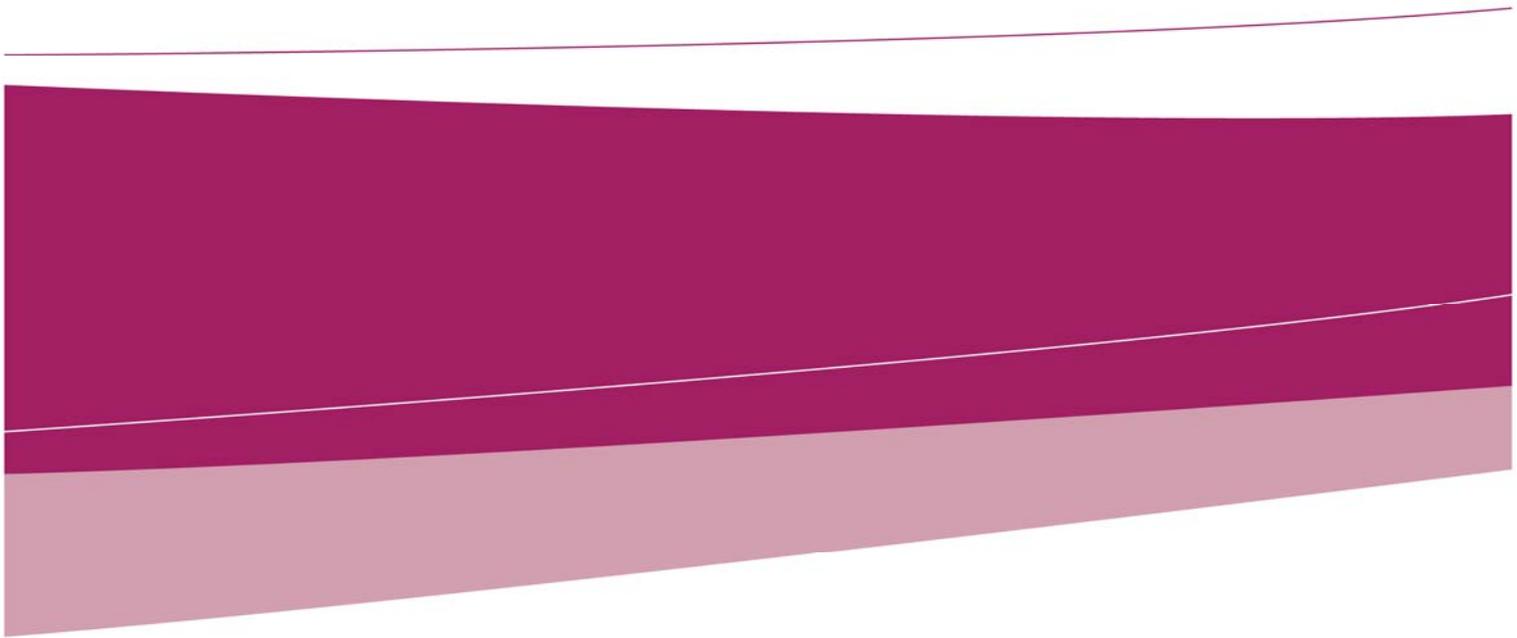


Manual 1

Management systems for effective online learning



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The Open University



Introduction to DeLTTUE

This manual is one of a series that form a toolkit that has been produced as part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme funded project – Developing e-Learning Tools for Trade Union Education (DeLTTUE).

This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein

The DeLTTUE project aims to produce innovative tools, strategies and good practice guidance to support the development of online learning within European trade union education and will enhance the online learning experience for union learners in all participating countries and throughout Europe.

The project involved nine partners from five countries. The consortium included five trade union confederations and the education and training agency of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) as well as other partners in the UK.

Contents

This first part of the toolkit provides guidance on effective methodology and strategic approaches to online course delivery.

Sections include:

1. Why online education and the advantages / disadvantages for stakeholders
2. Online learning quality standards and strategies
3. Getting started with online learning
4. Online course and materials development
5. Tutor guide.

Aims

This manual will help to increase the professional skills of trade union educators and managers, and improve management processes for online education programmes.

The online course development section details each stage of the material development process, including instructions on effective writing for online courses and the requirements for successful online course delivery. The manual outlines the externally determined standards and tests to which online learning materials must conform.

The manual makes it easier to create enhanced online education material, and makes the quality of the courses and support and guidance as effective as possible. It includes information on course design and testing, the successful use of the learning platform and moderation and accreditation.

The quality standards section covers the main interoperability and technical standards and requirements that need to be followed by trade union educators and curriculum developers.

This manual aims to help you answer these questions:

- Why should trade unions develop online learning?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- What are the key choices?
- What standards and recommendations need to be followed?
- How do I get started?

1. Why online learning and the advantages / disadvantages for stakeholders

Trade unions and online learning

Online learning is rapidly expanding and trade unions are becoming increasingly involved. There are a number of reasons for this:

- e-learning is spreading throughout schools, colleges and universities and more and more people expect to use the power of the internet to learn
- access to the internet is getting faster and broadband is now common and affordable
- more devices in common use such as mobile phones, tablets and laptops can be used to access learning materials on the web
- trade unions are expanding the use of their websites to offer services to members
- some trade unionists have difficulty in getting to courses run in a traditional way. Examples include people in remote locations, working on shifts, or wanting to study a specialist course
- Online learning can provide great flexibility for learners and also for tutors and administrators of courses.

These are powerful reasons for trade unions to investigate online learning. But what are the advantages – and are there disadvantages?

Advantages – and disadvantages?

The advantages of online learning are often linked to cost savings for the organisation. But there are many other advantages linked to flexibility, choice, and effectiveness of learning. Some of them we have touched on already.

We can look at advantages and disadvantages from the point of view of the various people involved – learners, tutors, administrators, and the union as a whole.

Advantages to learners

- flexibility - to choose when and where to study, using their preferred equipment
- independence – developing an enquiring approach and using the internet for research
- new skills – becoming an e-learner and improving ICT skills
- choice – gaining access to a wider range of courses, course materials, and methods of study
- opportunity – to join an online learning community.

Advantages to tutors

- flexibility in when and how to support learners
- ability to work from anywhere and not a fixed location
- a chance to learn valuable new skills of e-tutoring that are also useful in the classroom
- new ways to communicate with learners – email, forums etc.

Advantages to administrators

- courses not restricted by availability of space or local tutors
- opportunity to simplify administration through online recruitment, course materials and monitoring
- fewer course cancellations
- rapid communication with participants through email and messaging.

Advantages to the union

- stronger union organisation by educating a wider range of members and representatives
- modernisation of union systems
- improved reputation as a union changing with the times
- incentive to join the union and increased membership.

Disadvantages

Now we look at possible disadvantages for the same groups of people.

Disadvantages for learners

- may have to learn new ICT skills to work on the course
- may have equipment and broadband speed that is slow
- may prefer some face-to-face contact
- may have difficulties organising and focusing all by themselves.

Disadvantages for tutors

- will need to learn new e-tutoring skills
- must manage their time in a different way from conventional course tutoring
- may be faced with more individual requests for support
- may have difficulties combining courses that are both online and face-to-face. They demand different skills and it's easy to get stuck in one of them.

Disadvantages for administrators

- will need to set up new online course management systems
- need to make sure online systems are reliable, secure and backed up properly
- must make new relationships between learners and tutors.

Disadvantages for the union

- must develop a new approach to education and allocate resources to it
- need to develop a coherent, medium term strategy
- face-to-face contact is very important for building a strong organisation.

Key choices

So far we have talked about online learning and e-learning. But what are the key choices? What are the different types of online and e-learning? This is a complex question which we attempt to answer as simply as we can by showing a series of choices:

Choice 1: wholly online or blended?

- Your course may be wholly online or it may be blended or added to conventional courses.
- A blended learning course will include face-to-face elements such as classes lasting from a few hours to a few days, together with online elements such as forums and surveys.
- Blended learning is becoming increasingly popular in European universities and colleges as they seek to improve the flexibility and effectiveness of learning.
- Blended learning has its advantages and disadvantages – what is lost in convenience may be gained in effectiveness – careful consideration is necessary.

Choice 2: individual or group?

Your courses may be designed for individual study or for classes or groups. Courses for individuals often allow participants to start any time and may be described as rapid e-learning – see the section on creating rapid e-learning courses for more information on how to do this. Groups may be small, say 10-20 participants, but in some cases are larger with 20–100 participants. Generally, the more tutor input, the longer the course.

Choice 3: cohorts or not?

If your online learning is designed for groups, then they may be in cohorts or not. A cohort is a group of participants who start and finish a course at the same time, and usually work collaboratively on the course through for example group activities. A non-cohorted course would allow participants to join and leave at different times.

These different ways of organising online learning have different strengths.

Rapid e-learning for example allows a great deal of flexibility to meet new needs quickly, while group-based online learning stresses and exploits the value of collaborative learning and sharing experience. Both methods have their advantages, but be careful to select the right type of learning for the situation.

Examples from partners

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) has developed a system for rapid e-learning. There are 15 courses on different subjects. The aim is to support shop stewards with quick and immediate introductory courses. When they face a question they can hopefully find an answer to it in one of the e-learning courses. Also, before they are allowed to go to a classroom course face-to-face, they can be introduced to the subject by these courses.

Another way of using them is as a refresher: for example, a workplace representative did an employment law course 10 years ago and has forgotten parts of it. The e-learning courses helped them update their knowledge.

E-learning courses can also be used as part of a conventional face-to-face course or meeting allowing for a short self-study activity on a particular subject.

The TUC has developed a system of online courses which are fully cohorted like conventional classroom-based courses, with advertised starting dates. Group activities take place using an online forum, which learners can log into whenever is convenient. Online courses are run in a similar way to classroom courses. They involve a mixture of discussion-based activities, workplace tasks and individual project work. Online discussions are based around the activities and involve sub-groups of the class. They are facilitated by a TUC education tutor. Courses range in length from 18 hours to 36 weeks.

2. Online learning quality standards and strategies

The question of what standards should apply to online learning is often described in complex terms involving concepts such as accessibility and interoperability. However, as in the rest of these manuals, we believe a simple, comprehensible approach is best.

Here we look at what standards are needed and how to find out more.

Trade union education

The key starting point is that a decision to move to online learning does not mean abandonment of the basic standards and principles of trade union education.

This means that trade union online learning will try to:

- be learner-centred and use active learning methods
- promote the values of equality and democracy
- seek to build self confidence and develop skills
- help develop the union and build its capacity.

Open standards

In order to make your online learning accessible and to protect it against future changes, it is important to follow open, international standards for software and systems. Avoid if at all possible the use of software that is licensed exclusively by one provider. Here are the most important software standards:

World Wide Web

Your online courses will be delivered via the internet and so must follow World Wide Web standards. Standards for the web are maintained by the World Wide Web Consortium, often known as W3C. This is the site for their accessibility initiative:

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

The most important part of the web is the HTML language. This is constantly under development, with a new version called HTML 5.0 now being tested. Be aware that not all web browsers fully implement the HTML standard and therefore materials you produce will often have to be tested in browsers such as Firefox, Chrome and Safari as well as Internet Explorer. These browsers all behave differently.

Media formats

All media you use should conform to open standards. This means for example that any documents should be in PDF or RTF format and not in a proprietary format from a commercial supplier.

Images should be in JPG format and video in standard AVI. To illustrate this point, video produced in Flash is not currently available on an iPad or iPhone although this situation is set to change in summer 2012.

Accessibility

Web accessibility is just one part of the debate however. A broader approach to accessibility should be based on these commonly accepted principles:

- simple design and clear structure
- high usability, with navigation in the control of the learner
- alternative formats where necessary, such as PDF versions to print out
- conformance to open standards for text, images and media
- transcripts and subtitles should be available wherever possible in order to give learners with access requirements opportunities to participate.

A useful site for discussion of these issues is developed by the UK organisation JISC which supports colleges and adult education in the UK:

http://wiki.cetis.ac.uk/Accessibility_Tips

Service standards

Linked to educational and technical standards, there are also standards of conduct and standards of service. The main ones are:

- agreements between the learner and the union on course conduct such as a 'learning agreement' – this will include 'ground rules' that a learner will be expected to follow on courses
- agreement between the union and course providers on service standards, such as response times and availability of materials.

These points are covered more extensively in the Getting started with online learning section.

Examples from partners

Learners commit themselves:

- to co-operate in the achievement of the course objectives
- to participate in all units of the course
- to log on at least twice a week
- to meet the deadlines as given by the tutors and outlined in the course timetable or as agreed with course tutors
- to support and stimulate group work and discussions
- to share information and knowledge with the other participants and with the tutors
- to use appropriate language in discussion forums (no foul or discriminatory language)
- to advise other course participants and course tutors of any periods of absence from the course.

Tutors commit themselves:

- to provide course participants, prior to the course beginning, with a course timetable and information on general course content
- to provide each participant with a unique user ID and password to access all course areas
- to support the participants in their work
- to log on at least three times per week and reply to messages within 72 hours, other responsibilities permitting
- to advise course participants of any planned periods of absence from the course. Where these absences are prolonged (longer than a week), arrangements will be made for another tutor to cover the course
- to provide appropriate training materials that will enable the participants to achieve their course objectives
- to evaluate the learning process and the learning results.

Online learning strategy

It is important to have an online learning strategy that will inform the development of an online education programme. This strategy can be primarily used by education officers and curriculum planners. The issues raised in this manual might be seen as complex but go some way to establishing an online learning strategy. We stress however a common sense approach based on clear, established principles.

There are two further factors that will help:

- a clear online strategy setting out:
 - the main aims
 - target groups
 - standards
 - timetable.
- a development group bringing together:
 - educators and tutors
 - authors
 - administrators
 - union officers.

Examples from partners

The TUC adopted an online learning strategy in 2004. The strategy is based on offering all the conventional courses for union representatives in an online course format. The strategy states that the online courses will fully match the quality and effectiveness of the face-to-face courses and will be supported by existing trade union tutors who will be trained in their new role.

Action plan

1. Form a development group to develop the online learning strategy.
2. Decide on key target groups and a timetable.
3. Make key choices between online, blended, individual, grouped and cohorted learning.
4. Set out the key standards you require to be followed as part of the strategy.
5. Keep the strategy under review.

3. Getting started with online learning

This part of the manual looks at how to get started on your trade union online learning programme.

The key questions we look at are:

- How do I start an online learning programme?
- What structures do I need to put in place?
- What roles are needed?
- How do I check on progress?
- How do I measure success?

Project planning

First a few words about project planning. Project planning and management can be sophisticated and elaborate – but a simple approach is recommended.

The main elements to any serious project will be:

- a strategy setting out aims and outcomes
- an implementation plan and team
- a review and evaluation method.

Strategy

In the Why online learning? part of this manual we looked at what an online learning strategy should contain, and why.

To devise and monitor the progress of the strategy it would be normal to have some kind of steering group.

Examples from partners

Here is an example from the TUC of guidelines for a project steering group:

The project steering group is the decision maker for the project. It should normally include:

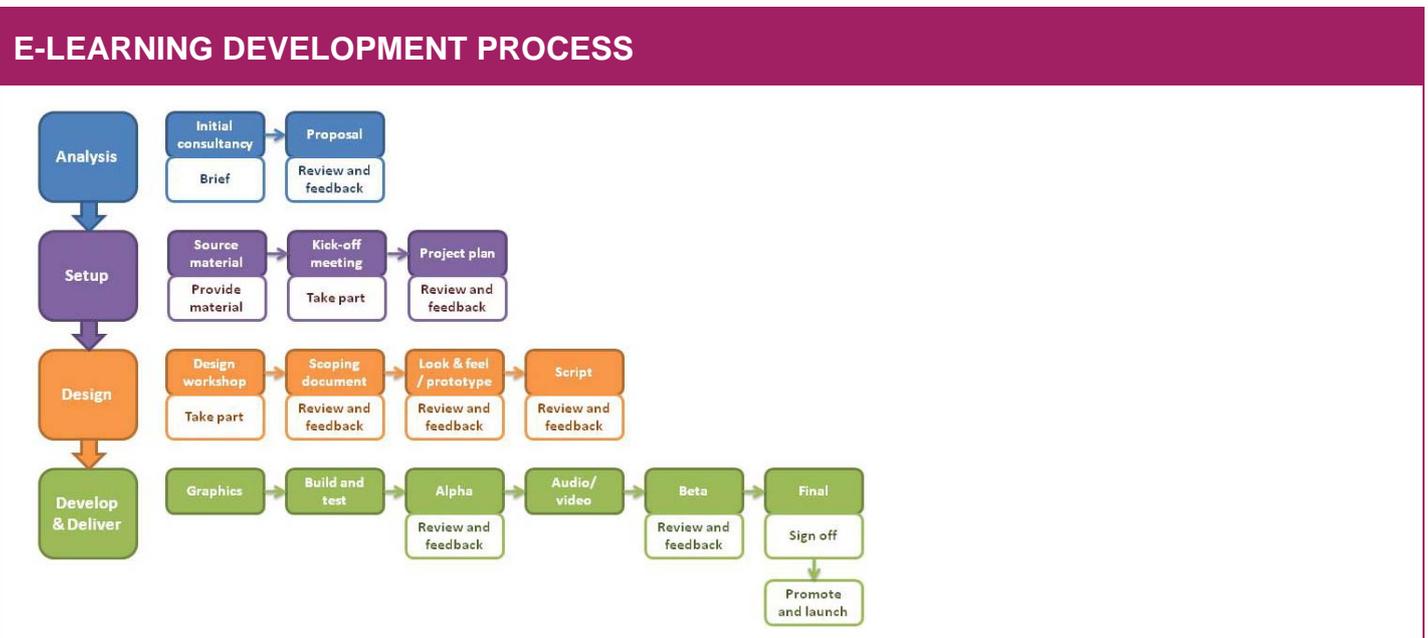
- the project director, chair of the steering group, project manager and finance administrator
- TUC online learning strategy guardian
- other stakeholder interests, such as unions and learners
- representatives of any funding bodies contributing to the project (if appropriate).

The project steering group will meet at key points in the project lifetime, and at least every quarter. The project manager will provide a progress report, and the administrator an up-to-date budget, in advance of steering group meetings.

Implementation plan

To put in place your online learning strategy you will need an implementation plan, and a team to make it work.

The bigger your project, the more formal your plan needs to be. This is even more the case where an external funding body is involved. Here is an example for the TUC of an implementation plan for an e-learning project:



Project Implementation Document

The Project Implementation Document (PID) is the foundation of the project.

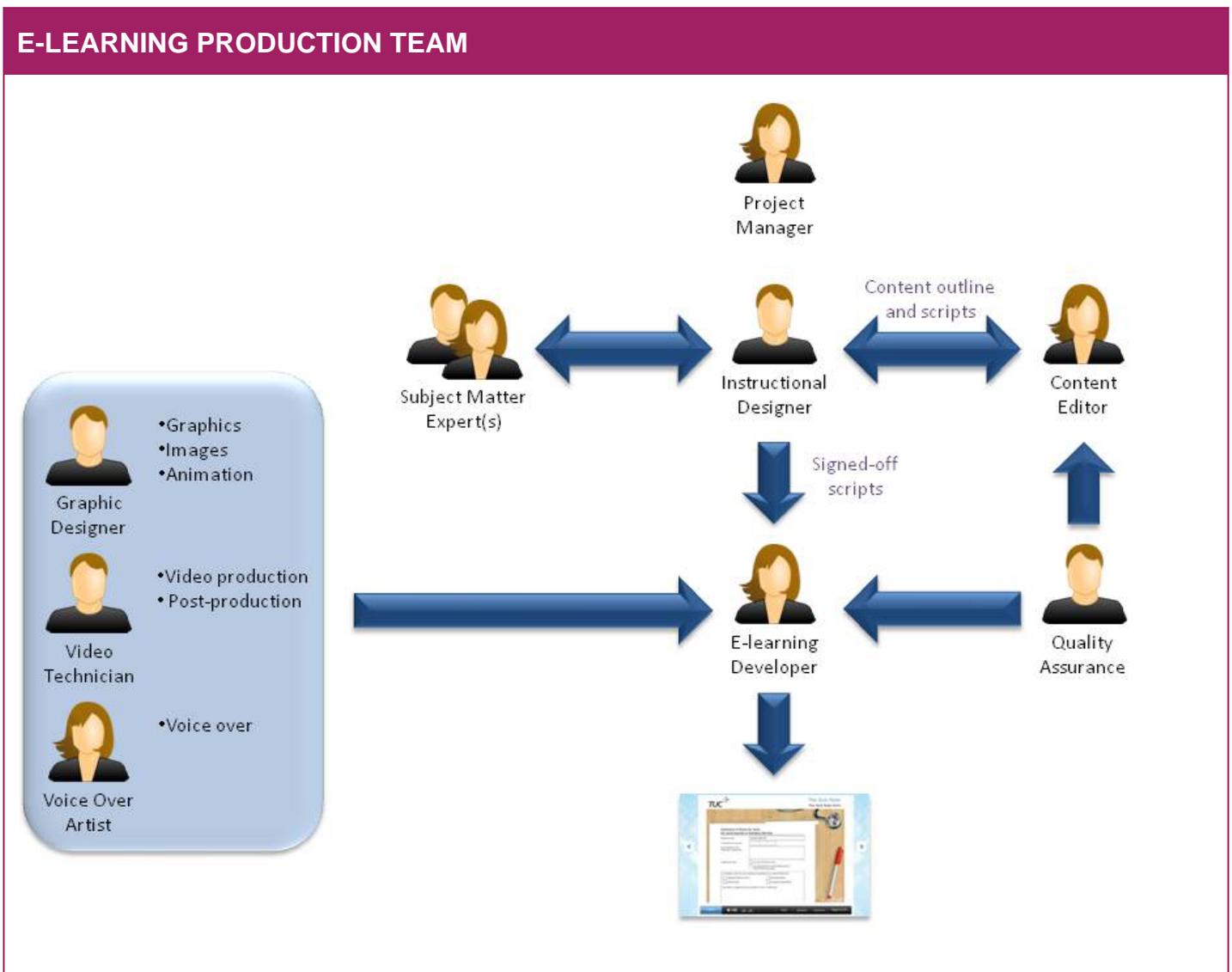
The document includes these sections:

- purpose of the document
- project overview and aims
- milestones
- project management and team
- project manager and other key roles
- project communications – reports, meetings, email lists, web pages
- risk assessment – listing risks, their likelihood and severity, and countermeasures to avert them and / or minimise their impact
- Gantt chart showing activities and time lines
- budget
- evaluation.

Implementation team

Good teamwork is essential to the success of your project. Your team may be small, but a number of different roles are involved.

Here's an example from the TUC example describing the roles in an implementation team for an e-learning project.



Remember that many of these roles may be combined.

Project implementation group (PIG)

The Project implementation group is the team which makes the project happen.

Full meetings are normally chaired by the project director, and participants include all other roles in the project team listed here. The PIG normally meets every two to four weeks.

All PIG members are on an email list that is used to send out project documentation.

Project director

The Project director is the senior authority for the project. The director sets the agenda for the project, and acts as its champion.

Project manager

The Project manager is the main communicator for the project, responsible for producing key reports. The manager should check all action points, and chase them up if they are falling behind.

Author/designer

The author is responsible for producing the course materials and media.

Learning technologist

The learning technologist converts the course materials to content for the online learning environment. Some tasks may be split between the author/designer and learning technologist, such as proof-reading, sub-editing and production of support materials such as online help and FAQs .

Tutor

See the Tutor guide for a discussion of this role.

Finance administrator

The Finance administrator is responsible for all matters relating to the project budget.

Moderators – where a course is accredited

There are two moderators: internal and external. The internal moderator works within the team to ensure quality standards and provide feedback. The external moderator is engaged by the accreditation body to monitor standards of work.

Evaluator

The evaluator may be from an organisation independent from the rest of the PIG and aims to collect evidence to determine how well the project is attaining its goals, and to recommend ways in which its methods could be enhanced to achieve these goals more effectively and efficiently.

Evaluation

Evaluation is sometimes thought of as a necessary evil – something you have to do to satisfy someone else. But this is far from the case. Evaluation should be done throughout at key stages of any project. Evaluation used sensibly is your guarantee of the quality of your project, and your way of making continuous improvements.

There are several types of evaluation that may assist online learning projects. This table sets out the main types, what they do and how this might be done:

TYPE	PURPOSE	WHO/HOW
Technical	Tests that the materials and software works on the equipment and software used by participants	Learning technologist runs tests
Content	Verifies that the materials are correct	Review by subject expert
Usability	Checks that participants can work through the course	Online data and learner surveys
Impact	Reviews what learners have achieved	Surveys and interviews with learners
Project effectiveness	Reports on how project outcomes met project aims	External researcher's report

Action plan

1. Develop your online learning strategy
2. Form a project implementation group
3. Allocate roles and draw up an implementation plan
4. Decide on your evaluation strategy.

4. Online course and materials development

This part of the manual looks at how to create the materials for your online course.

The key questions we look at are:

- 3.1 What materials are needed?
- 3.2 Where can I find materials?
- 3.3 How do I structure the materials?
- 3.4 How can I use pictures and videos?
- 3.5 How do I make changes?

4.1 What materials are needed?

There are three types of material you need for your online course.

- course description
- content
- learning activities

Course description

This will include items such as:

- the course aims
- programme and timetable
- any entry requirements
- guidance for learners
- course outline.

If you are designing a series of courses, use the same format each time. This will simplify the process and help learners to find their way around.

Content

This is the subject matter of your course. It can consist of many types of material:

- documents that already exist – such as policies, research papers, codes of practice. They may stem from your organisation or from a body such as a government department.
- presentations used in face-to face courses or meetings
- your own or external websites
- images, videos or audio recordings you already have or from web sources.

However these materials are usually not enough alone. They will need to be introduced, explained, and key points need to be summarised – such as in a checklist.

Learning activities

In conventional face-to-face courses learning takes place through a series of activities carried out by the participants, usually with the assistance of a tutor. These activities are wide-ranging and develop skills such as:

- finding information
- interviewing
- writing reports
- making presentations
- role playing
- making calculations on data
- analysing problems
- drawing up plans
- carrying out surveys of union members
- ...and many others.

These activities may be carried out by individuals or often small groups of two to four people.

The challenge for designers of online courses is to build good activities that help people to learn while they are remote from their tutor and other course participants.

Examples

Here are some examples of how learning activities can be designed for your online courses:

- **Course discussions** can be held using an online forum or bulletin board. The online forum could be for a whole course, or for a sub group working on a project. The online forum should also allow the learners to add attachments such as documents or photographs.
- **Finding information** is one area which is suitable for online courses. The course materials can contain links to useful websites. Learners can be encouraged to find their own online information and recommend it to others – for example by writing a summary or giving a star rating.
- **Learner portfolios** may also have a role to play. In conventional courses learners may be required to build up a portfolio of documents and perhaps photographs as evidence of work they have completed. In an online course the learners can be given their own space to hold files they have uploaded.
- **Quizzes** are popular activities in online courses. They can help learners find their way through information and check their own knowledge. Quizzes can be open to access at any time or only open for a fixed period.
- **Case studies** may be used to combine several types of learning. In a case study a problem or situation is described. Learners – often working in small groups – are then asked to analyse the problem, find relevant information, and then discuss and propose solutions, for example through a bulletin board discussion.
- **Finding trade union documents and reporting content.** Unions have various policy documents regarding discrimination, racism, collective agreements, policies and so on. A good learning activity for groups or individuals is finding a specified document and reporting some of the content to a tutor/discussion forum.

3.2 Where can I find materials?

We have already looked at some of the most important materials for your course – the course description and learning activities. These you will have to produce yourself – although you will often want to look at examples from elsewhere.

But what about the course content? This should be the basis of your approach:

Collect your own materials

Your trade union and national centre will have much useful material to use in courses – guides, handbooks, leaflets and perhaps videos. The union's magazines are also a useful source of photographs and graphics. Collect all the files together in one place to assemble into your course.

Look for useful external materials

The internet is a vast store of content for trade union education. Some of the most useful content is:

- Wikipedia and other online encyclopedias
- government and official websites, often containing details of labour legislation
- campaign websites, such as on health and safety and equality

Collect the web addresses for the sites you find and keep them in one place for later use.

Identify the gaps

Once you have collected all your internal and external materials you will almost always find gaps. Often these gaps will be explanations and checklists that help to make sense of the material you already have.

Make sure you are clear about intellectual property rights

Laws on copyright and intellectual property vary between countries but it is important that you are clear about your right to use materials from other sources. If in doubt, check.

Here are some general guidelines:

- You may use any material created by you or your union. An exception may be where a photographer for example retains publication rights over photos used in the union newspaper.

- Many websites make it simple for you to link to their material – for example Youtube has a feature to create an automatic link.
- Short extracts from books or periodicals are usually permitted for educational purposes.
- Many government websites allow you to download official documents and guidance notes.
- Many materials are now being issued with Creative Commons licences. These licences allow use of the materials in a variety of ways. For more information, see www.creativecommons.org.

3.3 How do I structure the materials?

Just like materials on paper, your online materials should have a clear structure. A clear structure will help you to plan a consistent approach. It will also help learners to find their way around your course.

Simple structure

The simplest structure for your course is well known. It goes like this:

1. beginning
2. middle
3. end.

The beginning of your course will contain the course aims, programme and timetable, guidance for learners and anything else needed to start the course.

The middle of your course will contain the learning content and learning activities, usually arranged in parts, units or modules. We look at this in more detail below.

The end of your course may contain a course review, action checklist, evaluation form, and suggestions for follow up.

Parts, units and modules

Unless your course is very short – for example less than ten hours long – then it is helpful to break it down into parts, sometimes called units or modules. In this manual we use the word 'parts'.

Here is guidance on how to plan the parts of your course:

- Each part should be the same length – except perhaps the beginning and end which may be shorter. Often this is expressed as the number of hours needed to complete the part, and/or the number of learning activities to be carried out by learners.
- Parts may often need to be divided into subsections, each containing a learning activity.
- Like the whole course, parts should have their own clear structure with a beginning, middle, and end. This structure should be consistent across all the parts of the course.

3.4 How can I use pictures and videos?

Images, graphics and videos can add to the impact of your course materials. They can also help to structure the materials – for example, each part of the course might start with a graphic illustrating the theme of that section. There are however some important things to consider:

- **Photographs** can be used to show images of people, places and objects relevant to the course. Examples include photos of a wide range of union members and workplaces, front pages of union booklets, and equipment used in safety monitoring.
- **Graphics** are often used to replace lengthy explanations of structures or procedures. Examples include union organisation plans, and steps in grievance and disciplinary procedures.
- **Videos** are often used to capture people speaking and to present case studies. Avoid lengthy 'talking heads' shots however.

Sources

There are three main sources of images and videos for your materials:

- those you make yourself or already made by your union
- those from public websites including photo and video sharing sites
- those made by participants on your courses and submitted for example to a discussion forum.

You need to check carefully that you have the right to use any images from public sources.

Problems to avoid

Common problems with use of images and videos include slow download times due to large image files, and compatibility problems with video formats. To overcome these problems you can:

- reduce the size of your image files by using photo editing software
- put your images on public sites such as Youtube, Flickr and Photobucket and link to them, rather than putting them directly in the materials.
- keep your videos short – often a 1 minute video will do
- put videos in Flash format which is accessible from many computers and browsers.

3.5 How do I make changes?

Ok – you have created your brilliant new online course. Now you have to think about how you are going to change it.

You will need to make changes for a number of reasons:

- errors need to be corrected – for example: weblinks might get broken or become out of date; updates are needed because of changes in laws or policies; or experience of running the courses suggests better ways of doing things.

However you need a clear plan for making changes. The plan needs to make sure that changes are made at the right time, that the right people are consulted, and that there is no confusion over which version of the course is the correct one. Here are some guidelines:

- Create a master copy of the course materials and keep it in a safe place. When a change is made, create a new master copy.
- Use a version control method setting out dates and authorisation for reviewing the materials.
- Make corrections to errors immediately, update every few months, and conduct a major review every one to three years.

Examples from partners

The TUC uses a system of master courses which are kept up to date and then copied each time a new session of the course is organised. Small corrections are reported to a helpdesk

and made immediately. Where updates are required they are referred to the course authors to implement. Every two or three years, the courses undergo a major review based on feedback from learners and tutors.

Action checklist

1. Decide on a clear structure for your course materials with a beginning, middle and end.
2. Be clear about the number of parts, units or modules and make sure they have a consistent length and structure.
3. Choose effective and engaging learning activities that will work online.
4. Collect existing materials from internal and external sources.
5. Make sure you are clear about intellectual property issues.
6. Decide on what images and/or videos you need and collect or produce them.
7. Design your version control and revision plan.

5. Tutor guide

This section is for tutors of online courses, based on a manual produced by the TUC. It reflects the conditions on TUC online courses, but is of general interest because of the issues it covers.

While in this manual we use the word *tutors*, other words may be used, depending on their roles. These words include moderator, facilitator, teacher, and many others. Some types of online learning, such as rapid e-learning, may have no tutor support other than perhaps a technical helpdesk.

Tutors of online courses need all the qualities of those on conventional face-to-face courses. These qualities include: skills to promote active and participative learning; commitment to trade union and democratic values; and an understanding of how adults learn.

There are however reasons why support for tutors of online trade union courses is needed:

- because learners are remote, the tutor cannot get immediate feedback from learners who experience difficulties
- getting learners to collaborate online requires a different approach
- learners may seek more one-to-one contact
- tutors will use different methods of communication with learners – forums, texts, phone, email, and others
- tutors may need to develop their ICT skills.

This manual provides some support and could be supplemented by for example:

- formal courses for online tutors
- team teaching or shadowing an experienced tutor
- an online forum for tutors.

Role of the tutor

The role of the online tutor is to help learners achieve the learning outcomes agreed for the course. The tutor can achieve this aim by supporting learners directly, but equally by encouraging peer support and problem solving, and self-directed learning. This may mean on occasion that the tutor has to pull back from intervention in order not to discourage collaboration by learners.

How you work as a tutor is key to how successful learners will be. The key elements of your role are to:

- motivate and coach learners to work through the learning materials
- promote constructive working and discussion within the study group
- give learners timely and helpful feedback on their work
- where a course leads to a qualification, support learners to achieve their accreditation.

Preparation for the course

Here we look at what you should do before your online course starts.

Two weeks before:

Make sure you have:

1. read through this tutor guide
2. working equipment, email and web browser
3. anti-virus software up to date
4. a back-up strategy for learner data that you store locally on your PC
5. a login account for the learning environment
6. familiarity with all the course materials, activities, the learning outcomes and any assessment criteria
7. check that you can find all the functions you will need in the learning environment
8. a plan if your primary PC stops working.

One week before:

1. introduce yourself to your learners by email and asking them to reply immediately so that you have email contact
2. soon after chase up any students who have not returned an email using a second email, and then phone
3. tell the online administrator if you fail to make contact with any learners in your cohort
4. organise your system of email filters and folders. It's important that you keep copies of all incoming and outgoing email related to your course.

The day before:

Send a starting email to all learners to check they have what they need to access the course (URL/username/password). A sample email is in the appendix.

Welcoming learners

Now we look at how to welcome your learners to the course.

Introduction

There are a few things it's helpful to check very early on in the course.

1. Are all learners on the course they expected to be on?
2. Can they all log in and access the learning materials, the discussion forums and other resources successfully?
3. Do they know how to save copies of everything they send to you?

Watching out for non/slow-starters

If any learners fail to send an email message or take part in activities within the first two weeks, contact them by telephone or letter. Remember that many learners lack confidence and it is vital to support and encourage them.

Online forums and small groups

Now we look at how to use the online course forums.

The first priority is to enable learners to communicate with each other, as well as you, and get discussion going by introducing themselves.

Discussion between learners may be:

- in the online forum built into the learning environment
- direct email between two or more learners.

Online forums

As part of your preparation for the course you will know where the course activities depend on the discussion forums for learner input.

Monitor the discussions carefully:

- Do some discussion threads need to be kick started? if so make an encouraging contribution to get learners to respond
- Are some discussions going off at a tangent? If so point them back in the right direction).

Remember that your role is to nurture discussion rather than dominate it.

Email groups

Some course activities ask learners to work on activities in small groups. You need to assign learners to groups and start them communicating. If some learners drop out or are progressing at very different rates, you may need to re-organise the groups.

Monitoring and supporting learners

Your job is to guide your students through the course – offering support, advice, guidance, expertise, encouragement, and feedback. You should aim to go on-line frequently and acknowledge receipt of messages within two days at most. Even if this is just "thank you for your message – I will reply in detail in a couple of days..."

All activities and assessments should receive feedback, even if only: "received your activity No.x all present and correct ..."

Assessments should receive more detailed feedback.

Targets

While online learning allows learners to work at a time and pace that suits them, many people prefer to have targets.

Consider:

- giving learners a rough guide to how many hours they should be doing the course, on average, each week
- setting interim targets, for example 'complete activity X by date Y'
- setting out a course calendar with activity completion dates
- encouraging learners to set their own targets around their own commitments.

Handle targets and deadlines sensitively, so that the course offers the full flexibilities of open learning.

Monitoring progress

Use the learner tracking functions within the learning environment to help you monitor the progress of your learners:

- Identify anyone who is falling behind, and email to check.
- Respond as quickly as you can to emails - acknowledge within two working days.
- If you are going to be out of contact for a period, tell your learners in advance.

Giving feedback

Your feedback to learners should:

1. encourage and support
2. be constructive and detailed
3. highlight positives
4. link to the learning outcomes
5. say what needs to be done if work is incomplete
6. point to other resources that might help, such as websites.

You may find it useful to have a word-processed document to store template feedback on activities where you find yourself repeating the same sentences/paragraphs.

In an online forum it is useful to show you are aware of the discussion by posting messages acknowledging what has been said before.

For example:

“Thanks to Peter for starting this discussion and to Jane and Kalsoom for their contributions. I am glad that you recognised that.... I look forward to reading Dorothy and Gurdeep's views.”

Using small groups

Course activities are often based on small working groups of two to four participants.

- Learners find it easier to build rapport and supportive relationships with just two or three others.
- They can review each others' work.
- Discussion topics are less likely to go off at a tangent without the participants being able to rein themselves back in.
- Tasks can be shared out informally in the small group.

These are some points to watch out for:

- It only takes one or two people to drop out for the group discussion to break down.
- Learners have to have sufficient skills to use group email.
- You need to find ways of monitoring which groups are working.

Unresponsive learners

Expect some learner activity each week, unless that learner has told you that they will be offline for a period. If you do not hear from a learner for a week send a brief email asking if they have encountered any problems. If you do not hear from a learner for two weeks then phone or write.

Some learners do not work consistently. They may make a stab at an activity, or make a minor contribution to a discussion, and make promises that they will catch up. They may suddenly say they are not able to participate because they are too busy, or are going away.

Here are some suggestions:

- Find out if there is an underlying problem.
- Suggest start and finish times for activities.

- Ask the learner to propose an action plan for catching up with work.
- Point out that the success of the group may be jeopardised.

Learners who want to progress faster

Sometimes learners ask if they can move faster through the course than others in their group. It is important that groups move through the course together. But you could suggest that:

- they look ahead and get on with the individual tasks, though you may not give feedback on them immediately
- they do some extended work, using additional resources.

If faster learners complain about slower ones you could suggest they experiment with tactfully encouraging the others in their learning sets to get moving, and see what works and what doesn't.

Appendix A

Sample welcome letter

Welcome to the YYY online course.

I will be your tutor on this course. My name is Mark O’Grady and I teach online courses for the AAA College. YYY will start on dd/mm/yy and finish at the end of mm/yy. [You may choose to include some personal information here].

I hope you have had a chance to download and read the Learner Guide for the course, as this includes all the information you need in preparation for the course, and reference during the course (if you haven’t got this, don’t worry, you can download it from <http://ppp.qqqq.rrr>) . We advise you to save and print the Learner Guide and read it carefully before embarking on the course itself.

Please let me know immediately if you have any difficulty in downloading or accessing this guide.

Please remember that once the course starts you will need to spend an average of at least x hours per week on it for its duration, in order to participate successfully in the collaborative work and also meet the assessment criteria. Also, if you do not keep up with the required work on YYY, you may be deemed to have withdrawn from the course. If you are likely to be away from YYY for more than four consecutive days, please let me know.

Please read carefully the Ethics Policy section of your Learner Guide. If you are likely to be working with anyone else during YYY, please let me know who they are, and how you anticipate they will help you.

Please remember that you are responsible for ensuring that the computer(s) you use during the YYY course has up-to-date computer virus protection.

[Optional friendly personal bit on the lines of “I note you are from Glasgow. This is one of my favourite cities in the UK”]

Please reply to this email as soon as possible so that I can be sure I have made contact with you. And please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions about the course.

I look forward to working with you.

Tutor name