13: Using an ICT portfolio to support adult learners making a transition from FE to HE Foundation Degree in supporting learning in education.

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Background
These learners are enrolled onto the Foundation Degree Supporting Learning in Education in a mixed economy Further Education (FE)/Higher Education (HE) college. The learners are mature learners and the programme is structured around a mixture of both classroom and work based practice.

As mature learners, and learners 'in transition' between FE and HE, they are a group seen to require significant support. This has lead to the development of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) portfolio package – a varied diet of email support, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) usage, and the use of online discussion.

Intended outcome(s)
1.   To support learners 'in transition' through a blended learning approach, adopting a varied ICT portfolio of practices;
2.   To support mature learners who are also distance learners as they spend some time on work based practice.

The challenge
The mature students on this programme traditionally suffer from issues of self esteem. We believe this is because their role – teaching assistant - has generally been seen as that of a 'parent helper' and not as a professional. The challenge was not only to improve self esteem of student but also to challenge stereotypical views of the teaching assistant. ICT competency varied widely within the group.

Research into adult learners has recognised the significance of the first days of a student's return to study and the subsequent implications for retention and achievement as the course progresses. They identify 4 key areas that any teaching strategies should consider:
•   personal issues: the ability to manage the work-life balance with its pressures of work, home and study as well as the development of confidence and a positive self image. This addresses issues of self-esteem as well as the 'imposter syndrome' (identified in this study as being significant for the mature student);
•   academic skills: the use of ICT and study skills appropriate to HE;

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- institutional engagement: knowledge about the college facilities and how to use them as well as the support services designed to ensure the learning experience is a positive one;
- societal support: the recognition of lifelong learning as a valid and appropriate approach to study at HE.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage
A more flexible approach that considers the time constraints and pressures faced by students trying to balance the demands of home, job and study. 24 hour, universal access to tutorial support and formative feedback allows students to adopt study patterns that would fit with other commitments. The structuring of an intensive taught start to the programme with teaching and support 'front loaded' also provides high level initial support whilst students develop new skills (ICT competencies) and prepare portfolio of competency evidence.

The whole experience is underpinned by an email tutorial system which encourages students to interact informally with the tutor and to present drafts of work to be formatively assessed.

Key points for effective practice
The development of academic study skills, the second element of good practice described above, can also assist in achieving a work-life balance. Topics such as time and stress management (both of which are covered in the block week) allow students to develop a personal plan for their range of responsibilities, and minimise the stress that can be caused. In addition activities that develop HE skills such as note taking and critiquing can boost students' confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of the programme and overcome the self confidence issues arising from the time lapse between periods of study.

Our blended learning solution is based upon the following:

- We need to recognise the demands placed upon students following a non traditional study route, and how we might best support them – in this case through a blended and varied ICT diet.
- The curriculum needs to be structured for the cohort of this practice around intensive initial ICT skill development.

There needs to be flexible access and individualised support.

Risks to be aware of include the fact that the wide range of ICT skills within the group means that some students might still struggle and that equipment off site may not be adequate or compatible.

Conclusions and recommendations
This study has provided the teaching team for the Foundation Degree Supporting Learning in Education with a valuable opportunity to review and analyse their practice.

There is a general consensus among the staff that the value of the block week to the students is significant and provides (in the words of one of the students) "an encouraging atmosphere to start to produce work". Future development days will hopefully build on this and produce an even more stimulating and challenging learning experience.

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Analysis of the standard achieved in the students' ICT portfolios shows that it has increased and comments from students would seem to indicate that it has been a valuable and important learning experience which made them better prepared and capable of future study.

This approach has been so successful that when the team developed a 'top up' BA (Hons) programme this model was central to its design.

Additional information:
The ICT portfolio – our blended learning solution to our learners' needs - includes the following:

1.   Use of e-mail system to seek formative feedback and to send/receive attachments.
2.   Use of desktop publishing package to compile an information leaflet.
3.   Use of online academic research facilities e.g. Athens.
4.   Produce a PowerPoint presentation to convey information.
5.   Participate in online discussions via a virtual learning environment (VLE).