

Producing e-learning modules for high-need groups for use in a community setting - What we learnt

This post draws together the lessons we have learned from producing e-learning modules for high-need disadvantaged groups that we think might apply to similar projects. We hope that it helps others to avoid some of the pitfalls that we fell into.

The Project

We set out to test the use of an e-learning approach to share the learning from our community public legal education sessions with a wider audience. We planned to develop four different types of e-learning course, and received funding from the Legal Education Foundation for the first two. These were designed to be used with the most disadvantaged groups in a community setting (both with learning groups and on a one-to-one basis through community, advice, and support workers) to equip participants to deal more effectively with law-related issues.

The first module aims to teach specific skills – how to find information on rights and the law, something we know provides a stumbling block to many. The second module aimed to help users to better deal with a problem very common to disadvantaged people – benefit sanctions, and sought to help users understand how to avoid them and how to deal with them. We had both of these modules independently evaluated.

Try out our modules for yourself

<http://www.advicenow.org.uk/know-hows/how-find-out-about-law-e-learning-course>

<http://www.advicenow.org.uk/know-hows/how-avoid-or-deal-benefit-sanctions-e-learning-course>

Project Findings

The central aim of the project was to test if e-learning could be shown to increase the legal capability of participants in the same way that our community courses do. In this we have been partially successful. The independent evaluation concluded that the ‘pilot has demonstrated that e-learning can be an effective way of increasing legal capability to deal with specific problems. The learners who tested the Benefit sanctions module reported very strong increases in their knowledge about this issue and their confidence to deal with, and help others to deal with, this problem.’ However, there is not yet evidence that e-learning works for developing generic legal capability skills. ‘The very limited evaluation data for the Finding out about the law module indicates that there was no increase in self-reported legal capability as a result of taking this learning module.’ If additional resources were available, our priority would be to test the ‘Finding out about the law’ with further groups. More data might be all that is needed to address this question.

In the event, this course was tested with just one group and then with individuals. It may be that the group that this course was tested with may have had higher than average legal capability or belief that they had a higher than average legal capability. Or it may be connected to the fact that the majority of testers were individuals. As the independent evaluator put it “does the improved legal capability which is evidenced for the Benefit sanctions testers result from the nature of the e-learning module (i.e. problem focused rather than generic PLE) or from the environment in which the learning module is used (i.e. in a supported group setting rather than individually)”.

Lessons we learned

Creating interactive e-learning courses is difficult and labour intensive, and therefore expensive

The true cost of developing e-modules like these was much higher than anticipated for two reasons. E-learning developers' fees are higher than we had anticipated at the proposal stage of the project. We were lucky enough to find a developer who believed in the project so much they were willing to do it at below the market cost - charging us £5,000 per course (rather than £8,000+ VAT and any expenses). As a result of the insufficient funds for the developers, we had to make some choices about design and teaching activity based primarily on budgetary concerns, rather than testing what would be most effective for our audience.

Secondly, the amount of staff time needed to develop the course content and ensure the product was suitable for such a high-need audience was considerably higher than expected. The content for these courses was drawn from our community courses and so much of the development was paid for from another project. However, we underestimated at the outset how much time and work would be required to repurpose the material for this use.

This was our first foray into e-learning and did pose a big learning curve to us. It is true that we learnt so much about both the process and our partners Walkgrove from producing the first course, we were able to produce the second more efficiently. But even so, for future projects we would need to budget far more than we did for the process of re-writing the content for this very different medium for such high need groups.

We have concluded that the true cost of future modules of this kind is closer to £20-25,000 per module. This breaks down as £8-12,000 +VAT for development. This would pay for a design similar in style and sophistication to the existing modules, which use high levels of interactivity, bespoke illustrations and professional voice over. The higher amount would allow for a higher level of interactivity and/or more complex animations or graphics and/or more complex branching which would allow us to deal with behavioural elements as well as knowledge and process. And 24 days for educationalists to create the content, work with partners on the storyboard and interactive challenges, liaise with stakeholders, test the material with end users, refine the material, publish the module and promote it, as well as manage the project, report to funders etc. An appropriate amount of time for promotion and dissemination is key or the scale needed to offset the upfront cost of these modules will not happen.

This upfront cost is considerably more than we anticipated. But, if you have an appropriate budget for promotion (which is key to reach scale) it still represents good value for money, in that it can reach so many more people than offline courses, and individual users as well.

The importance of testing with different groups

We have always been advocates of testing materials with members of the intended audience prior to finalizing them. Testing both modules underlined the importance of properly testing and evaluating each product. The testers spotted things we didn't spot, had difficulties we hadn't expected, and their likes and dislikes were frequently different to those areas we had identified.

We piloted the first module with a group of Age UK members, aged 60-89, and it seems likely that some of the findings have been skewed by this particular group. Given that we are trying to reach a fairly diverse audience of high-need individuals (including disadvantaged young people, speakers

of other languages, disabled people, hard to reach groups like Roma, etc.) it would be ideal to test each module with 2 or three different groups.

The limitations of IT available in many community settings

We have been aware from the outset of this project that access to IT and the internet is very limited in many community organisations and the difficulties that poses for this kind of project. However the test of Module 1 made us aware of a new possible limitation (that organisations would have access to the internet and be able to access most of the module, but that the default system would block pop-ups and not display a 'pop-ups blocked' message). We worked with developers to solve this problem.

'Off the shelf' products are often not suitable

As discussed above, e-learning modules are usually designed for very different (and usually captive) audiences, and rarely for high-need disadvantaged groups. Therefore, most of the 'off the shelf' products offered by developers are unsuitable. For example, E-learning modules are usually presented via a Learning Management System (LMS), which captures data about the number of users, how far through and at what speed they progress, and how they answer the questions that test the learning. An "Off the shelf" LMS requires details like the users' full name and email address as standard in order to log in. This is not appropriate for many of our target audience who may not feel comfortable giving any identifiable details and may not have an email address. As a result, we have had to develop a bespoke version for our modules.

Build productive partnerships with developers

We were, as the independent evaluation concludes, very lucky to find Walkgrove as a partner. Walkgrove are an established e-learning provider. They provided excellent support and worked collaboratively with us to refine the concept, explain the technical options available, produce story boards for the modules, develop test versions of the modules, and finalise the modules based on feedback from testers. They also did all of this for considerably less than the normal fee as they were committed to the value of the project. It simply wouldn't have been possible to have produced modules like these on the available budget without Walkgrove.

We were not alone in learning a lot from this project. This is because e-learning modules are usually designed for very different (and usually captive) audiences like employees and students, and rarely for high-need disadvantaged groups. As a consequence our objectives, our audience's needs, and the subject matter, posed a steep learning curve to Walkgrove too. We had anticipated testing working with another developer on our next modules, but the improvement in efficiency in developing (and arguably outcome) of the second module as compared to the first, suggests that it may be a far better use of resources to continue our partnership with Walkgrove.

Combining written and audio

We were concerned, prior to testing, that the combination of both audio and written information might be off-putting or confusing. However, we knew that many of our intended audience would benefit from audio to support their literacy needs. We also knew that many users would not be able to access information that was only available in audio due to inadequate computers, not having access to headphones, computers in many settings where the sound is automatically

turned off, and of course hearing difficulties. However, testing showed that it was much less problematic than we feared. Testers found the narration easy to follow in both its written and audio forms, including testers whose first language was not English. Testers had mixed preferences and views on the narration. Some testers preferred to follow the audio narrative, others preferred the written text and some used both together. No-one in the testing groups found it confusing to have the audio and written narratives alongside each other and several testers reported that this was useful.

Learning Management System (LMS)

Walkgrove, our partners in this project have a bespoke Learning Management System which they usually charge for, but allowed us to use for a fixed period for free. The importance of using the LMS as it provides information about course usage was repeatedly stressed to us, but in the event we remain unconvinced by its efficacy for projects such as this. It is designed primarily for e-learning modules with a very different aim (for example, created by employers to train their staff) but for projects like this where we are less interested in the score of an individual, it is only of very limited help.

The LMS shows a percentage score for questions answered correctly, but cannot show which questions have been answered correctly or incorrectly. As a result, this information is of limited value to us in evaluating the course or understanding which areas users struggle with. We will continue to link from the e-learning modules to our own evaluation survey. This will allow us to continue collecting feedback on any difficulties which learners experience with these modules.

For future courses, it might be better to explore the option of not using a Learning Management System and instead asking the test questions as part of the feedback survey. This would enable us to know both the total score for that individual and which questions users got wrong.

Log-in arrangements

From the outset of the project, we were aware that being required to log in would be problematic for some vulnerable users, because of concerns about anonymity. Feedback from the test of the first module made it clear that users without these concerns were not happy with creating user accounts or passwords in order to get started. The log in arrangements were subsequently simplified but remained necessary for the LMS. Ideally, we would have removed them completely.

Collection of information from the evaluation survey

Many people did not progress to the evaluation survey at the end of the course. For future courses, it would be good to explore options such as:

- only allowing learners to exit the e-learning modules via the evaluation survey, rather than having an optional link to the survey.
- changing the evaluation survey format to include an interactive test of the knowledge gained in the e-learning module.
- offering a small incentive to learners who complete the evaluation survey.

As more people went to the survey than completed it, it's possible that a contributory factor was that not all the survey questions were on one page. We might be able to achieve this by setting up a separate evaluation survey for each module rather than routing learners through to the relevant pages in a single survey. This is something to consider for future modules.

We are very grateful to the Legal Education Fund for funding this work.