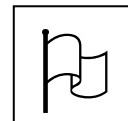


Blogging with ALDD Learners – Advice for Tutors



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With thanks to Barbara Kernick, Caroline Ross and Rob Tedder

This document draws on the experiences of a small number of Devon ACL tutors who successfully used a 'shared' blog with ALDD learners in Spring and Summer terms 2007. It reports on their findings and suggests advice for other tutors on ALDD programmes who might be considering using a blog within their courses.

1. Introductions – What and Who

LifeChoices courses are held at a small number of Devon ACL venues and comprise one day a week for 30 weeks. Most groups have access to Internet-connected computers for some of the day. The courses are designed to develop Independent Living and Leisure Skills (ILLS) in groups of adults with learning difficulties or disabilities (ALDD).

The **LifeChoices blog** was set up early in 2007 – as part of the 'Moles' project - for use by a small number of LifeChoices groups within Devon ACL. The LifeChoices blog is an online facility that allows different groups and individuals to type in their own entries which can then be viewed by other groups and individuals, via the Internet. As well as viewing each other's entries, users can respond by typing in 'comments' or replies to those entries. These comments can then also be seen by anyone viewing the blog. Entries on the blog can incorporate pictures – and, potentially, sound - as well as text. The LifeChoices blog is a 'closed' blog meaning that a username and password is required before the blog can even be viewed. This adds a degree of privacy and security not available in 'open' blogs.

As part of the Devon ACL **Moles project**, a small number of tutors experimented with using the LifeChoices blog within their sessions during a few weeks in Spring and Summer terms 2007. This document is based on findings drawn primarily from the 3 most active tutors. Following the successes of this pilot phase, the LifeChoices blog will continue to be used and extended in the 07-08 academic year.

The 3 most active tutors had **4 groups** between them (as one tutor had 2 groups):

- Group A: had 7 learners (6 male, 1 female) with a range of abilities from Pre-entry to Entry 3. Of the 7 learners, 3 had some limited ICT skills and 4 had hardly used a computer before. The group included 3 learners who could not read or write sufficiently well to type in to the blog or read what was on the screen.
- Group B: had 9 learners (7 male, 2 female) aged between 20 and 50. Most had used a computer before, at an elementary level, and 2 learners had sufficient skills and confidence to 'login' to the blog on their own.
- Group C: had 10 learners with a balance of male & female and abilities from Entry 1 to Entry 3. Most learners had used a computer before at some level with a couple that already 'really loved' ICT and a couple that really didn't.
- Group D: had 8 learners, again with a balance of male & female and abilities from Entry 1 to Entry 3. As with Group C, most learners had used a computer before at some level with a couple that 'really loved' ICT and a couple that really didn't.

2. Benefits of using the blog

*Tutor feedback from **Group A***

The immediate and most notable effect was that the learners found that they were part of something larger. They realised that there were other groups in Devon doing similar things to them and this somehow validated their work.

“We did that”

“We found shapes on road signs too”

“They went to....., can we do that?”

And learners enjoyed using the blog:

“I like looking at what other people are doing”

“I like making comments”

“I like telling people about what I am doing”

“I like finding out if people like the same things as me”

“I like the fact that you are learning what other groups are doing and you have the chance to tell them what you have been doing”

Also, being able to use the blog according to individual ability gave instant differentiation!

*Tutor feedback from **Group B***

The students gained confidence, pride, creative expression, involvement in a wider community, familiarity with the Internet, interest and respect for their own and others' contributions and a great deal of amusement from the blog. The students have become more used to and more competent in the use of computers through their interest in the blog.

The simple input form gives all students a creative outlet (with help in some cases with spelling and grammar). The fact that the blog is an adult medium and gives good quality results is important.

*Tutor feedback from **Groups C & D***

It took at least five weeks to get the learners to fully understand what the Blog is and does...(but)... now everyone asks if we are going to do the Blog today and when! There is great excitement when we receive a comment and the learners are asking questions about the other groups. We read entries, discuss them and sometimes we copy some good ideas! Photographs on the blog have enhanced their interest. We sometimes talk about what they would like to say during our afternoon tea break and sometimes we save time by writing out – on paper - what they want to say (ensuring it is their own words) so they can get straight in and type without having to wait for us.

Everyone enjoys this session and we have extended the time we take to ‘Blog’. Not only are they learning how to use a computer, but they are improving their communication and literacy skills.... Mostly the learners want to write about their news and sometimes they write about something that they haven’t spoken about and it can be a great prompt for an individual learning goal.

We have ‘open days’ coming up and the Blog will feature heavily in ‘showing off their work and skills’. It means we can show the parents, carers, friends and other tutors something new. I can’t wait for the learners to do some teaching – how proud are they going to feel that there is something they know how to do that others don’t!

3. Practical advice for Tutors

This section focuses on using the blog in teaching and learning rather than the technical procedures of logging on, 'posting' items etc - which are covered in a separate document. Note that basic blogging is very easy for both learners and tutor - and even (for the tutor) managing the blog is fairly simple.

The 'blogging' tutors tried a number of approaches and came up with the advice below:

To begin with it may take a while to get going, but to keep this to a minimum:

- Don't make the learners learn the whole process of getting to the blog
- Don't try to get the learners to understand the mechanics of the blog
- Do make a simple list of instructions appropriate to your learners (eg click this, click that, type there...) for once they're in the blog
- Get all learners 'hands-on' as soon as possible - try to ensure everyone gets a turn at making a comment or an entry
- Contribute to the blog yourself to help move things along
- Use images to get learners engaged
- Stick at it - the benefits **will** come – it's worth it

When it's **up and running**:

- Facilitate ALL learners making a meaningful contribution to the blog, so for example
 - For learners with low literacy, type their entry yourself, but **use their exact words** so they have ownership of their contribution. Read the words back to them a couple of times.
 - For Entry 1 learners it may be best to discuss what they want to say then write it out for them on paper – then get them to type it in
 - Where appropriate, Entry 2 and 3 learners can login for themselves and work more independently
 - If using group contributions, make sure you've got an input from everyone
- Experiment with using a small number of separate 'low-level' logins so learners can work on the blog separately, as well as a shared login for group contributions
- Use images – either photos from trips or relevant images pulled off the Internet – this really helps keep all levels of learners engaged
- Encourage learners to **make** at least one comment a week – it's a big motivator for the recipient, even more so if it comes from someone in another group
- Try to ensure that every learner **receives** at least one comment each week – check the blog before the session and add some yourself if there are any without

Incorporating the blog

- When you've completed an activity, discuss what you're going to put on the blog about it; take pictures on your trips and decide which to use
- Use the blog as a means of meeting objectives such as improving (and recording) communication and literacy skills, offering differentiation and achieving individual learning goals – as well as a way of engaging learners.

Possible **extensions** that you might like to try:

- Use a digital voice recorder (Devon ACL has a number of these for loan) to record verbal contributions for the blog – which can be uploaded in a similar way to photos. This is good for evidencing progress with learners who struggle with the written word. But check that the computers have sound otherwise learners can't hear!
- Use learners' improving ICT confidence to look at other items on the Internet.

4. Privacy and Security Issues

Although the LifeChoices blog is a 'closed' blog – and so requires a username and password before it can even be viewed – privacy and security should still be explicitly addressed and routinely reinforced with learners.

This is partly because the username & password system is not guaranteed or totally secure - it can be bypassed if a user doesn't log-out before switching off for example, or if a computer is set to automatically remember passwords. But, more than this, it is important to develop learners' own awareness of security so that they are equipped to deal with wider uses of the Internet and other technology.

For these reasons, it is important that the following **never appear anywhere on the blog**:

- Learners' full names
(but first name and letter is OK eg 'Ronnie P' – or use a self-chosen nickname)
- Contact information of any sort (address, phone number, email)
- Sensitive information about learners
- Bank or credit card details etc, should this ever arise

This applies both to original entries made by anyone in the group and to comments made by learners – and anything from the tutor, of course.

As a consequence of this, there are a number of **things to watch out for** on the blog:

- Make time after each session to skim through all entries and comments and check there is no inappropriate information or 'over-disclosure'. If there is, edit it out – then explain why, next time you meet
- But sensor as little as possible so learners retain ownership of contributions
- Before each session, check comments made **to** your learners' entries by other individuals or groups during the week and edit if necessary. (The blogging software can email comments to you as soon as they have been made, if this helps)
- But be aware that **you cannot edit comments made to another group** by your learners – unless you have the password(s) for that group. Hence if a learner makes an inappropriate comment to another group you will need to contact the tutor of that group to have it edited. (But if the other tutor is checking all comments received then he/she will probably have noticed and dealt with it anyway.)
- Check with learners before including photos of them on the blog, and be sensitive about the photos you put on

Note: in practice only minimal tutor intervention has been required in the groups using the LifeChoices blog to date.

About the blogging software used

The LifeChoices blog was set up using 'Blogs2Teach' software as it is well suited to adult learners, has a good range of options and requires little technical knowledge. It also includes facilities for multiple users with varying permission levels. This allows learners to be allocated a permission level appropriate to their situation and allows tutors to retain overall control of their learners' contributions and comments.

See www.blogs2teach.net for more information.