

Open SESAME!

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are benefiting from award-winning, work-based, open learning materials. Pip Hardy reports.

In the autumn of 1999, the National Extension College (NEC) approached Pilgrim Projects to develop flexible, work-based learning materials – due for delivery in February 2000. These learning materials were to be tailored to the needs of staff in busy small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and, in particular, they needed to cover the topics of:

- Financial management
- Entrepreneurship and competitiveness
- Workforce development
- Information technology skills.

The result – called Small Enterprise Sensitive Accessible Management Education (SESAME) - is part of an award-winning programme developed for Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) and the National Extension College (NEC). SESAME was recently awarded the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative Best New Media award as part of the SOLNET programme. APU accredited the SESAME learning materials and the whole project attracted funding from the European Social Fund.

Pilgrim Projects began by specifying the shape and structure of the work, defining four modules on topics of particular interest to managers and employees in SMEs. The initial specification was for each module to consist of eight units, plus a ninth unit comprising the study guide. Units followed a conventional open learning format: sections headed by clear objectives with explanatory text, plenty of formative activities to test out new skills and theories, and pointers to other resources.

Two methodologies helped to shape Pilgrim Projects' development of the materials. First, the materials were to be problem-based. In other words, students identified a problem that might be solved through studying the module. The intention behind this was to provide motivation and focus for learners.

Second, accepting that one of the marks of a true professional is the ability to reflect on - and learn from - experience (as argued by Winter, Eraut, Schon and others), the methodology of reflection was chosen as the most appropriate basis for students' work. Several reflective tools, including Critical Incident Analysis along with the models proposed by Johns (1994) and Tripp (1993) were included in the study guide, together with guidelines for their use.

The assessment strategy provided Pilgrim Projects with much to mull over, with constraints imposed by ESF funding arrangements and APU's accreditation system.

Each of the four modules was worth 20 credits at level 1. Students satisfactorily completing 60 credits – that is, three modules - would be awarded a Diploma in Small Business Management. Equally, it was possible to use the study materials without having to gain this accreditation.

The University's definition of level 1 contained the following outcomes. The student had to:

- show a clear understanding of the assessment tasks
- demonstrate relevant skills and competencies
- express ideas coherently and in a structured manner
- show an awareness of the relationship between theory and practical skills
- begin to develop competence in analytic skills
- show an awareness of his/her own strengths and weaknesses.

These outcomes ultimately formed the basis of Pilgrim Projects' strategy, since they were sufficiently generic to be used for each module.

BAOL 'Open Learning Today'
Issue 64 - April 2003

Mindful that most SME employees already have more work than they can comfortably manage, any form of assessment employed needed to test the learners' understanding of the module without greatly adding to their workload. Pilgrim Projects' solution was to follow standard business report conventions. These were in-keeping with the emerging assessment strategy.

Thus, the report - and consequent assignment - structure emerged:

- Identify a problem or issue and justify its choice
- Identify and expound upon those theories, models or skills - gleaned from the module - which might be most appropriate in dealing with the problem
- Propose recommendations or solutions to the problem.

The assignments were based on the three parts of the project report and were, in turn, supported by a learning journal. If students completed each assignment, and acted on feedback from tutors, relatively little work was necessary in order to create the final, polished, project report.

Students were encouraged to use a learning journal to keep track of their thoughts, hopes, ideas, questions, as well as memos, notes, minutes of meetings that might be relevant - bearing in mind which stage in the programme they had reached. Students seeking formal assessment and accreditation submitted, to their tutors, those parts of the learning journal that were pertinent to the assignment. Tutor feedback informed learners of any additional work necessary to pull together and enhance the journal entries and bring the work up to assignment standard.

The modules and study guide were written, edited, laid out, checked and printed. Some 30 tutors attended a training day and the first cohort of students began work in February of 2000. The initial response was enthusiastic and a number of students went forward for accreditation. Many others found what they wanted within a short time of starting the programme. Quite a few of the learners have gone on to study other modules. The original materials were formally accredited in June 2000, with a letter of commendation from APU.

Three further modules - on marketing, business law and learning organisations - were developed during the following year and Pilgrim Projects was accorded 'associate tutor' status with APU in 2002.

In January 2002, APU approached Pilgrim Projects to develop a further three modules, but this time - in response to comments from students and tutors - they were to be re-designed. The conventional open learning materials - heavy ring binders containing many pages - were to be replaced by something lighter - in all senses of the word - more modern and appealing to a younger target audience.

Refined instructional design, adopting the 'double page spread' as the most appropriate length for each topic, necessitated new graphic design. The slimmed-down content resulted in three slender volumes on:

- Global issues
- Family matters
- Social enterprise.

The new materials have been greeted with even greater enthusiasm – so much so that one student had completed his work within the first two weeks, having studied for some 150 hours!

By Pip Hardy

References

- Eraut, M. (1994) 'Implications for standards development' *Competence and assessment Compendium No. 3* London: Department of Employment
- Tripp, D. (1993) *Critical Incidents in Teaching*. London. Routledge
- Johns, C. (1994) 'Nuances of reflection' *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 3: 71-75
- Schon, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Aldershot. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.
- Winter, R. (1994) *Learning from experience – Principles and practice in action research*. London: Falmer Press

End