



Blended Learning Report December 2011

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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We thank all tutors and learners in each of the above centres for their dedication, patience and co-operation during this project. In particular, we would like to thank those people who sent in photographs which we hope add to and better explain much of what we describe in this report.

In some cases, other staff and IT support personnel were also involved in getting the centres up and running on writeon.ie and to all those people, we also extend our thanks.

A particular note of thanks is also due to Perlico for donating the laptops that allowed NALA to set up the Blended Learning Project.

Main messages

In 2010 the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) carried out a project with 12 adult literacy centres across the country to introduce and use www.writeon.ie as a part of traditional face to face centre based tuition. Participating organisations were invited to take part in an evaluation of this blended learning approach with a view to documenting how the literacy centres worked with www.writeon.ie and NALA to deliver blended learning opportunities to adult literacy learners.

In total, 110 adult literacy learners took part in the project. Site visits to each of the centres took place after learners from the sites started using www.writeon.ie. The data gathered at each site visit details and describes how blended learning worked in each of the sites. The visits were conducted while blended learning activities were taking place and allowed us to observe how the learners and tutors participated in the activity, their level of engagement and the interaction between learner and tutor.

The main findings from the research show that;

- centres and NALA collaborated effectively in providing additional flexible learning opportunities to learners;
- centres found that basic literacy learners were interested in using ICT to improve their literacy skills;
- www.writeon.ie was proven to be a useful tool in providing accreditation options to interested learners, both from the learners and from the centres' viewpoint;
- learners' ICT skills improved as a result of taking part in the project;
- blended learning provided a means of extending learning time and encouraging independent study;
- the approach allowed tutors to more effectively address individual learning needs in a group context.

Since this pilot project, www.writeon.ie has been used by **63** different learning centres across Ireland. NALA believes that the information in this report will be of value to practitioners interested in working in this area. The www.writeon.ie programmes at both Level 2 and 3 are on the FETAC Register for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report *Developing Recognition of Prior Learning* described the NALA RPL process available in www.writeon.ie as "an effective RPL mechanism", and recommended it as a platform for the development of RPL within further education and training services at Levels 1-3.

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a research study carried out by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in 2010 with 12 literacy centres in Ireland. The purpose of this research was to document how the literacy centres worked with the National Adult Literacy Agency to deliver blended learning opportunities. This report is intended as an introduction to this new approach to delivery of literacy learning in Ireland and is targeted at literacy practitioners interested in exploring this area. We hope the processes and results we have documented here will encourage other practitioners to consider this method as a way of:

- expanding capacity,
- adding value to current practice, and
- integrating information and communications technology with more traditional interpretations of literacy.

Background

Research suggests that there are barriers to participation in adult literacy tuition, mainly associated with time, transport, location and care issues. There are also more complex barriers of the stigma and embarrassment associated with having a literacy difficulty and past school experiences (NALA, 2010, 2008, 2009; De Brún & Du Vivier, 2008, McGivney 2004, Bailey & Coleman, 1998). Consequently, there is an ongoing need to develop a range of creative and innovative options to address these barriers and match adult preferences and circumstances (Hegerty & Feeley, 2010).

Over the past decade, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has been operating a Distance Learning Service (DLS) which aims to provide high quality free distance learning opportunities targeted at improving literacy without regards to social, economic and cultural backgrounds and taking account of all levels of technical ability. In NALA, Distance Learning is defined as occurring when learners and tutors are separated by either space or time. This is a broad definition, which reflects the fact that distance education can involve people studying in a range of personal contexts using a number of learning or communication technologies.

What is Distance Learning?

NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS) draws from characteristics applied in traditional forms of literacy learning provision, as identified in *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Practice* (NALA, 2005). These include:

1. Learners learn without having to be in the presence of a tutor or other learners.
2. Learners can select where and when learning takes place.
3. The pace and sequence of learning is controlled by the learner.
4. Learning takes place in a non-threatening atmosphere.
5. Learners develop their capacity for independence and self-reliance as a learner.

The simple premise of distance learning in NALA is that we use mass media to motivate people to call our Freephone number (1800 20 20 65). When people call us, we either direct them to an appropriate local literacy service if this is what they require or we further support them over the telephone and online through weekly one-to-one contact with an experienced literacy tutor employed by NALA. This tutor works from their own home and connects with the learners at a time and using a method that best suits their needs. In 2009, NALA worked with 472 distance learners; in 2010, this number grew to 650 learners.

The service strives to ensure that technology is best matched to purpose and that these uses are complementary. So television and radio is used to broadcast the key messages that learners with reading and writing problems are not alone and that help is available. Once people have been motivated to call our Freephone number, telecommunications provides the initial link between NALA and learner. Telephone and/or online communication tools are then used to provide tutoring, which is supported by postal and online distribution of learning materials. The Internet is further used to simplify and standardize accreditation. Administration is facilitated by use of Internet telephony, web-accessed databases and instant messaging.

NALA also offers accreditation at FETAC Levels 2 and 3 through www.writeon.ie. To date, 1,062 learners achieved 4,779 minor awards and 443 major awards at Level 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications for Ireland. In addition, 255 learners achieved

754 minor awards and 58 major awards at Level 3. Most of these awards were achieved through a blended learning approach to adult learning.

NALA has also developed an online learning repository at resources.writeon.ie, containing all NALA's printed and digital resources, searchable by level, award, theme, content and media type. This allows practitioners and learners access to a simple one-stop-shop containing all of NALA's main learning resources. It is intended that over time this bank of resources will develop into a national digital learning repository to be of major benefit to the adult literacy and wider education and training sectors. It is also intended that this archive will be a repository of best practice content. This increasing access to NALA's learning resources means that practitioners and learners can blend learning resources and media in different learning settings to offer increasingly diverse solutions to their needs.

It is clear then that adult literacy practitioners and learners are being presented with ever more creative and flexible ways of working. Because of this, NALA decided to conduct a blended learning project in order to more closely observe the usefulness and possibilities associated with using blended learning and to outline opportunities and challenges in doing so.

What is Blended Learning?

Whether learning is class-based or independent, NALA encourages a blended learning approach. There are many definitions of blended learning.

Blended learning aims to join the best of classroom teaching and learning with the best of online teaching and learning. (Rochester Institute, 2004)

Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. (Wikipedia, 2010)

A method of educating at a distance that uses technology (high-tech, such as television and the Internet or low-tech, such as voice mail or conference calls) combined with traditional (or, stand-up) education or training'. (Smith, 2004)

However, what is clear is that there is not one single shared definition for the term. For this reason, NALA has adopted the following definition of blended learning:

Blended learning is about facilitating learning using a variety of approaches, best determined by the needs of the learner and the capability of the provider. It may or may not involve computers. It is simply a way of creatively matching different approaches to learners, content and contexts. (NALA, 2009)

Blended learning means creatively blending learning resources and media in different learning settings to offer diverse learning solutions and opportunities. In many ways, adult literacy tutors have probably already been practising blended learning for years - using authentic materials, going on field trips, study visits, agreeing non-classroom based projects – all these tasks and activities use blended learning approaches.

NALA believes that literacy practitioners and learners should have the opportunity to devise a blended learning solution that best fits their needs, environments and aspirations and www.writeon.ie offers a new dimension to this. Many different blended learning solutions are possible. A blended learning approach to teaching and learning can be of great benefit in allowing learners to learn outside of traditional and time constrictive learning settings.

However, it should also be noted that blended learning approaches using www.writeon.ie also offer advantages to tutors and centres by providing free complementary support to learners outside of class time. It also provides a route to accreditation that minimises impact on tutor and administrator time, thereby allowing centres to divert more resources to learning support.

Figure 1: Blended Learning in Mallow



Blended Learning Project

In January 2009, Perlico, a subsidiary company of Vodafone, donated 50 Dell Vostro laptops to NALA. Twelve of these laptops were used by learners and tutors during filming of the second series of **Written Off?** To encourage participation in blended learning across a range of contexts, NALA made the remaining laptops available to learners participating using www.writeon.ie across the country through its **2010 Writeon.ie Blended Learning Project**. We received 33 applications and selected 12 centres to reflect a range of learning contexts and learners.

Figure 2: Perlico Laptops Ready to Use



Aims of the Blended Learning Project

The aims of NALA's blended learning project were to

- develop blended learning opportunities, including accreditation, for adult literacy learners using a combination of traditional and web based learning resources, in particular www.writeon.ie, and
- to gather information on the usability of www.writeon.ie

As a first step in the process NALA invited organisations, who were members of NALA, interested in receiving up to 5 laptops to access www.writeon.ie to apply to us using an online application form. The organisations who were successful received the laptops

preinstalled with Windows XP. The laptops were then donated to the participating organisations. NALA selected participants to reflect as broad a range of geographic and socioeconomic groupings as possible and to balance selection according to gender and age of participating learners.

Selection process

An internal NALA panel evaluated applications. Participants were selected using the following criteria:

- Understanding of www.writeon.ie
- Clarity of project aims
- Integration with other forms of delivery
- Support from organisation in terms of tutoring and ICT
- Innovation
- Previous experience in applying ICT to basic learning

NALA also selected participants to reflect as broad a range of geographic and socioeconomic groupings as possible and attempted to balance selection according to gender and age of participating learners.

In this project, tutors in the classroom used www.writeon.ie to provide consistent learning opportunities to learners interested in using computers and the Internet. In some cases, learners did additional work from home after the class. The main benefit of the site to centres was the simplification of the accreditation process as all learners were approved through NALA's FETAC approved quality assurance system:

- Learners using the site completed diagnostic assessment exercises which identified strengths and gaps in learning.
- They completed personalized learning plans depending on the results of this diagnosis.
- Following satisfactory repeat demonstration of skills and competencies across specific learning outcomes, they then became eligible for summative assessment.
- Completion of this assessment allowed them to apply for a minor award by printing out a form, filling in some details and attesting the work was their own.
- In the case of the Listening and Speaking and Writing awards, learners also had to complete some additional assessment activities.

- NALA's internal verification and external authentication processes then completed the accreditation process.

Sites Selected for Project

The following 12 sites were selected:

- Return to Learning Kenmare, Kerry Education Service
- Co. Meath VEC Adult Literacy Scheme
- Leitrim Education for Adults Programme
- Co. Sligo VEC Adult Learning and Education Centre,
- An Cosán, Tallaght
- Offaly Read and Write
- Dublin City South West Reading and Writing Service (Crumlin)
- Coolock/Darndale Adult Literacy Service
- Co. Limerick VEC Adult Literacy Service
- Warrenmount CED Centre
- Mallow Return to Education Centre and
- Belmullet/Westport Basic Education and Literacy Service.

Figure 3: Blended Learning in Co Meath

Site Visits and Questionnaires

As part of the process, participating organisations were invited to take part in an evaluation of the blended learning project. As part of the evaluation, each site was required to take part in providing NALA with monthly progress reports and to facilitate at least one site visit and be available for additional evaluation consultation.

The purpose of the site visits was:

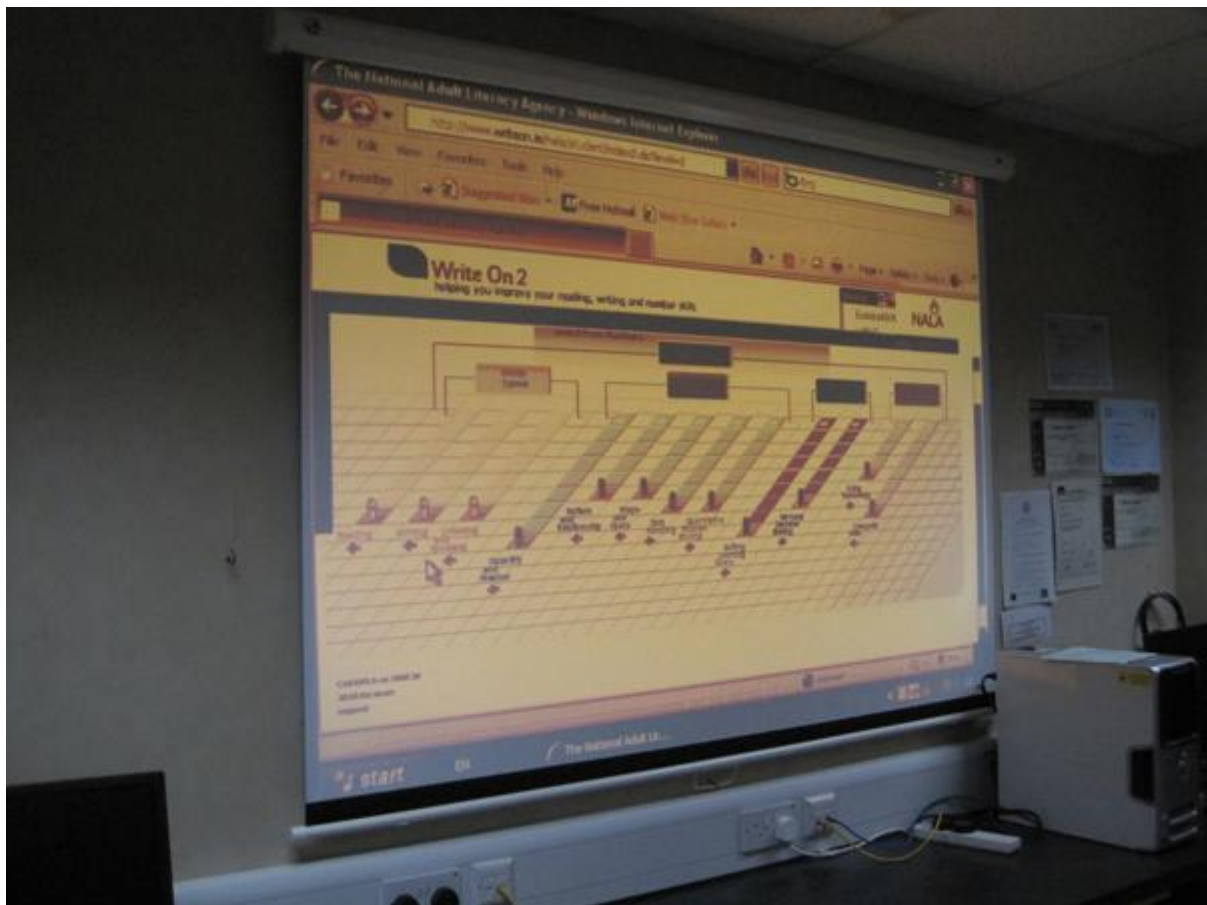
- to administer a questionnaire that examined the experience of learners, tutors, and centre managers of adopting a blended learning approach;
- gather a description of learner progress during the process;
- discover what learners and tutors liked and disliked about using a blended learning approach, in particular using the www.writeon.ie website; and
- conduct confidential discussions with organisers, tutors and learners.

The site visits took place after learners from the sites started using www.writeon.ie. The site visits were conducted between March and June 2010. The data gathered at each site visit details and describes how blended learning works in each of the sites. The visits

were conducted while blended learning activities were taking place and allowed us to observe how the learners and tutors participated in the activity, their level of engagement and the interaction between learner and tutor.

It should be noted that only Level 2 accreditation for 9 minor awards was available during the timescale of the Blended Learning Project. Since the Blended Learning Project took place, NALA has added 3 new minor awards in the area of Numbers on www.writeon.ie and developed Write On 3 to provide accreditation options for 11 minor awards at Level 3.

Figure 4: Write On (12 Awards) Projected in Mallow



Since the launch of www.writeon.ie in September 2008, NALA has facilitated the awarding of minor and major awards at Levels 2 and 3 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, broken down as follows:

Level	Number of Learners	Minor Awards	Major Awards
2	1,062	4,779	443
3	255	754	58

Level 2 accreditation is offered by the Write On 2 aspect of the site, while Level 3 accreditation is facilitated through Write On 3. Write On 2 was launched in September 2008, while Write On 3 went live on October 18 2010.

Despite the large numbers of learners and centres using www.writeon.ie for accreditation purposes, the vast majority of learners use the site for learning and do not apply for any awards. This is evidenced in the fact that to date, over 18,000 learning accounts exist and yet just over 1,000 learners have applied for accreditation.

Figure 5: Write On - Levels 2 and 3



Section One

Overview of Participating Centres

The section presents an overview of the centres involved in the Blended Learning Project. It presents a profile of the tutors involved in blended learning, the programmes involved in the blended learning project and the frequency of blended learning activity.

In total, 19 tutors took part in the blended learning project; 18 of these were female with one male tutor involved. The majority of the tutors involved in the blended learning project were in the 36-44 age group. Each site typically had one full time paid tutor with a number of part-time and/or volunteer tutors also involved in delivering the programme. The majority of them also had five or more years tutoring experience.

Chart 1: Age Range of Tutors

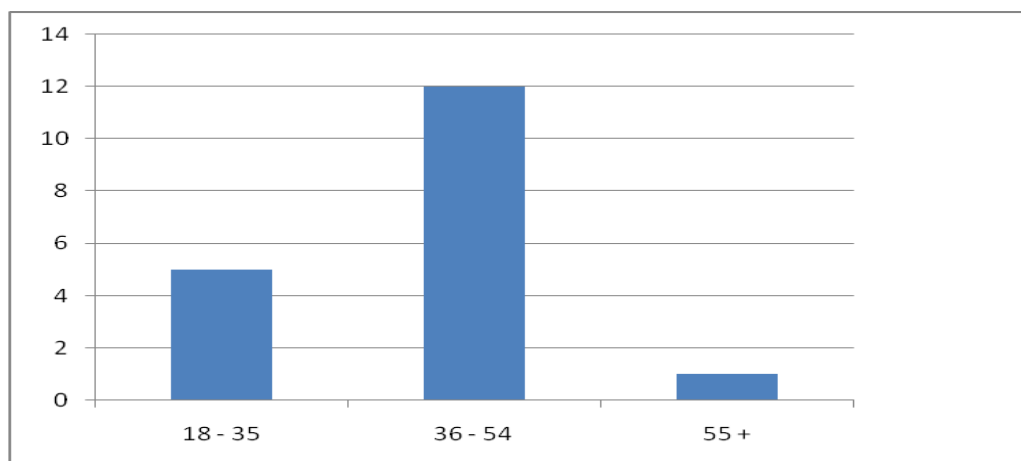


Chart 2 Previous Tutoring Experience

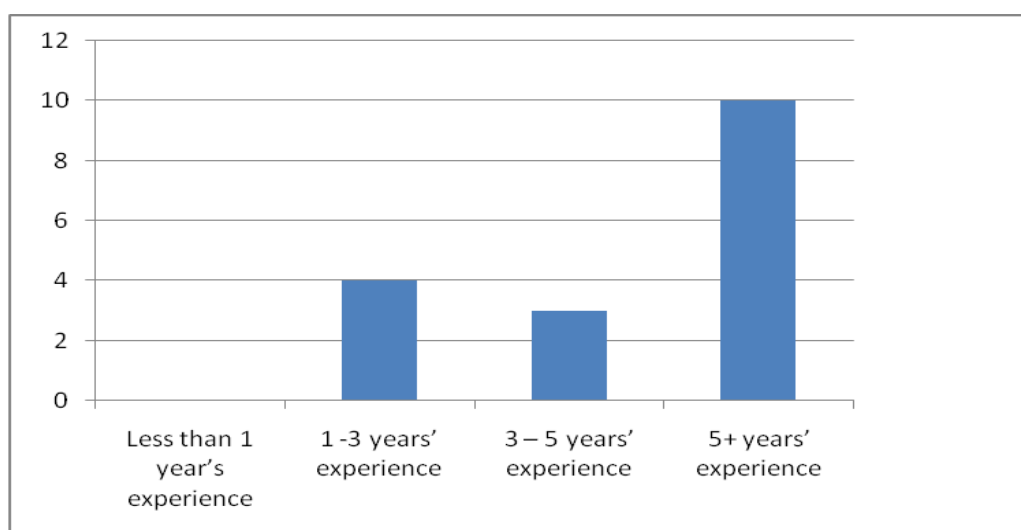


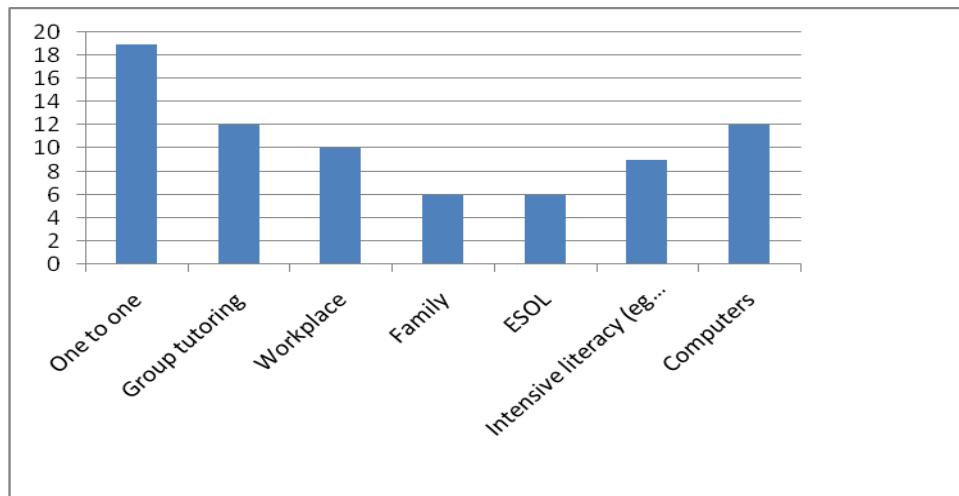
Chart 3 Tuition Offered

Chart 3 displays the type of tuition on offer to the adult learners in each of the centres. As can be seen from the chart the majority of learners took part in one to one tuition with group tutoring and computers scoring at the same rate.

Figure 6: Group Learning in An Cosán, Tallaght

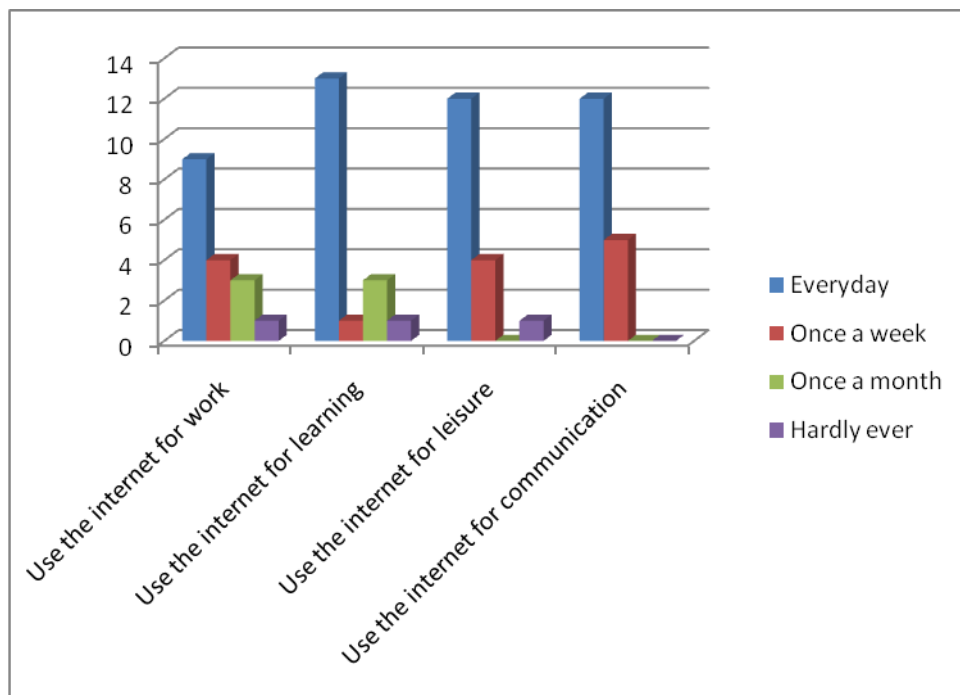
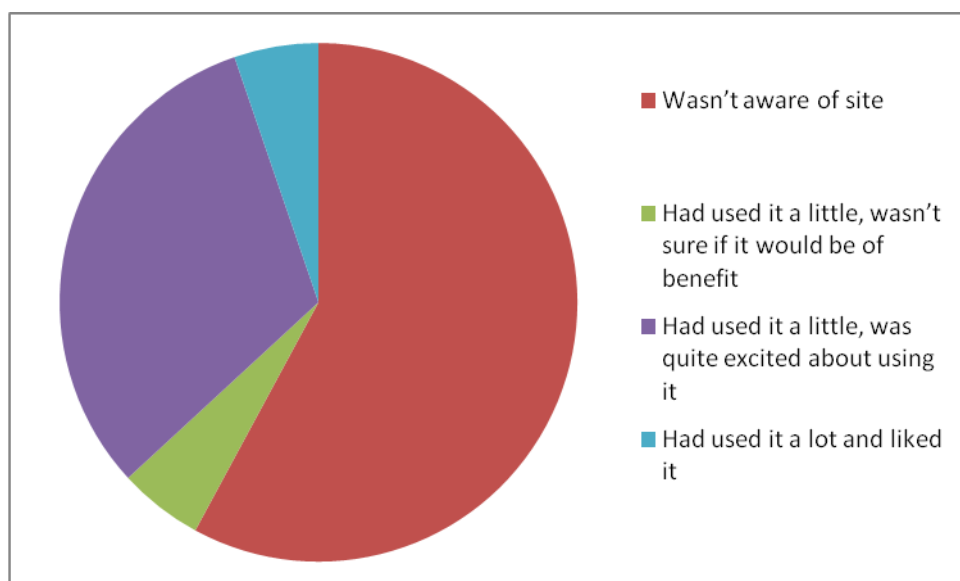
Chart 4 Previous Experience of Using ICT

Chart 4 shows that all of the tutors are IT users and use computers daily. The chart also shows that the majority of tutors use the Internet for learning on a daily basis.

Chart 5 Perception of Writeon.ie Before Tutoring Began

The majority of the tutors indicated that they were not aware of the writeon.ie before they began tutoring on the blended learning programme. However, a significant number had used it a little and were quite excited about using it with learners.

Chart 6 Description of How writeon.ie Was Used in Blended Learning

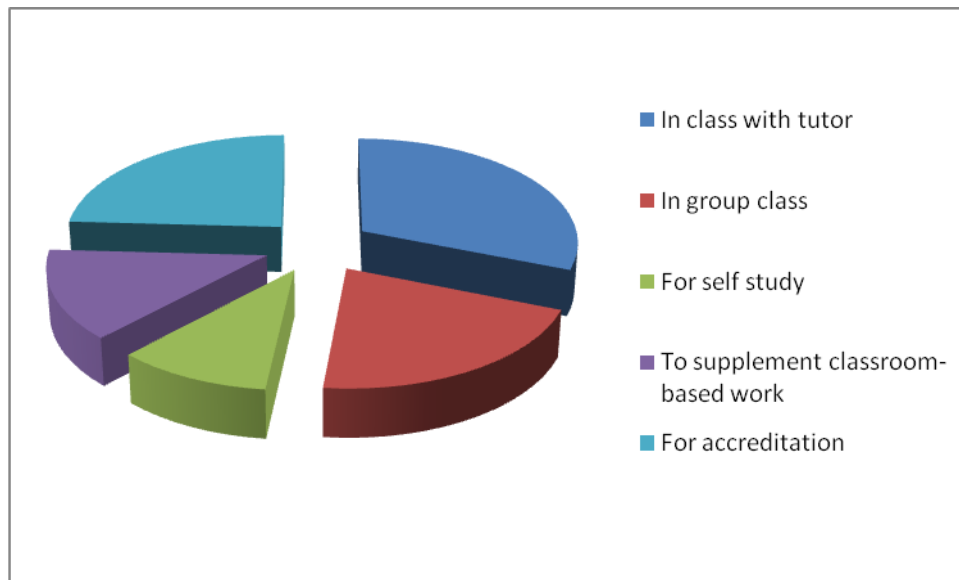
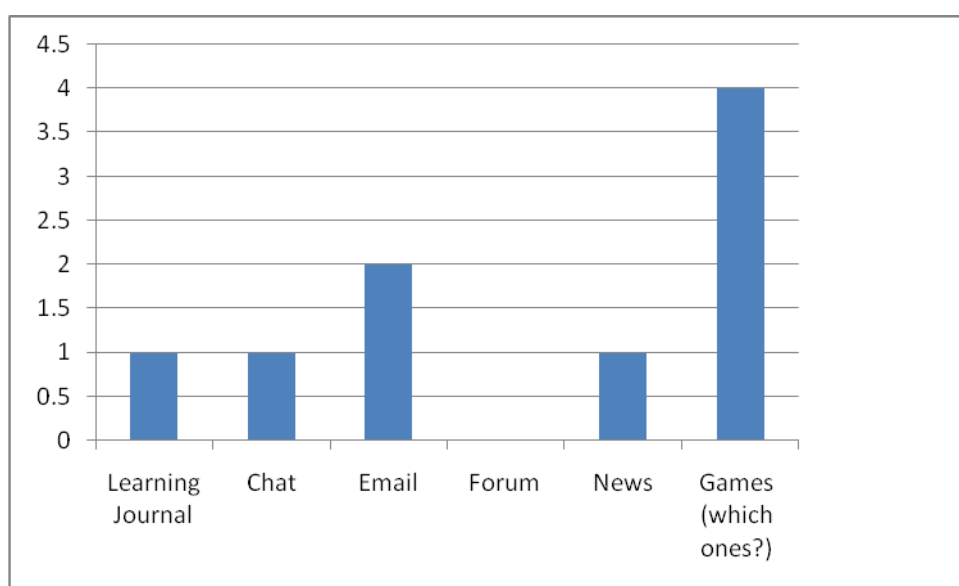


Chart 6 shows that the most popular way of using writeon.ie was in the classroom with tutor support. The chart also demonstrates that a significant number of learners were using the site to achieve accreditation.

Figure 7: Tutor 'floating' in Leitrim

Figure 7 shows a typical interaction that was reported by several tutors on the project. Following group discussion, learners begin working on their own computer, with the tutor 'floating' between learners answering specific queries in short one-to-one interactions. The tutor pictured above, Fiona Higgins in Leitrim, described this as doing lots of one-to-ones at the same time.

Chart 7 Which of the Following Features Were Used?

The above chart shows that other aspects of the site apart from the elearning content were used very little. For instance only 4 learners accessed the Games area and nobody used the public forum.

Figure 8: Tutor in Mallow



Figure 8 shows a tutor in Cork explaining various aspects of the site to a group of learners. While projected screens were used regularly across the blended learning sites we visited, they were not always necessary. In conversation, several learners commented on how great it was to be learning using 'high tech' equipment. The effect of this in terms of motivating learners cannot be understated.

Feedback from Organisers and Tutors

Most of the feedback from Organisers and Tutors about the project was positive. A sample of these is shown below, most of which refer to www.writeon.ie:

High levels of interest shown so far, we have discussed it at staff meetings and they are looking forward to using the site. I would like to host a training workshop for all my tutors. (Organiser)

Those with low levels of computer skills get a bit nervous at the idea of working online, but once they've done a few screens and are feeling a bit more confident, they settle down well. They like it as it allows them to work at their own pace.

(Organiser)

Tutors think it's fantastic when they've used it. (Organiser)

Great tool to get learners in and becoming computer literate. Great carrot.

(Organiser)

My students have begun using blended learning within our weekly sessions. We are continuing to work using practical learning tools, but after this part of the lesson, we work on the writeon website. (Tutor)

It's a great break from books and paper. (Organiser)

Like how it was structured. Gave you a great idea of the levels. (Organiser)

Like idea that students can log in at home and work away. (Organiser)

Working really well, delighted to be involved in it. (Organiser)

Works very well – was sceptical at beginning given our rural male mix of students. (Organiser)

Combination of media stimulating – like the graphics, audio and text. It's very multisensory. (Tutor)

Accreditation is a great incentive. A cert means a lot to people who have no certification. (Organiser)

Very good for confidence and self esteem – learners able to bring it outside and talk about computers. (Organiser)

Site is a great leveller – group ended up at same level at the end. Haven't seen that so much in previous groups. Different learners found different parts of the site more difficult depending on their own skills. (Tutor)

It's almost like improving ICT skills by stealth. (Tutor)

It's not a pen, it's not writing, it's a computer, that's a great advantage for my students. (Tutor)

It's a very effective use of a tutor's time. (Tutor)

Tutors viewed the blended learning option as an additional teaching and learning tool leading to skills development as well as growth in confidence and self esteem. (Organiser)

Initially, many of the learners were a little apprehensive, however, they overcame this with encouragement from their tutors and the high level of support from other students and IT tutor. There was excellent feedback when some of the students reported they had applied their newly gained IT skills (independently) to everyday tasks. (Organiser)

It should be noted however that there were also constructive comments indicating areas for improvement. Some examples of this include:

Difficult to follow. It works at a certain level for the more advanced students. (Tutor)

Found the little man hard to move. (Tutor)

The voice was hard to understand. (Tutor)

Some sections were too long – we couldn't get them done in class. (Tutor)

You need to move the logout button away from the navigation area. (Tutor)

Some questions express particular opinions that we may not agree with. (Tutor)

Some tutors who were not so strong re IT were not as interested in using the site. (Organiser)

The level was very high for some lessons. (Tutor)

We needed a lot of help to get the site up and running in our centre. (Organiser)

More training is needed. (Organiser)

It would be better if students had computers at home. Many students here don't have this. (Organiser)

All comments were taken on board by NALA. Most issues have subsequently been addressed in site upgrades. Other matters fed into usability testing in September 2011 and will result in a better user experience for learners in the long term.

Adopting a Blended Learning Approach

In general organisers and tutors reported that for many learners using blended learning and IT in the classroom was an 'attractive' complement/companion to more traditional ways of learning. It allowed learners who were interested in computers the opportunity to improve their IT skills while at the same time offering a different learning experience to more traditional methods. Most tutor/learner pairs worked in a one-to-one setting for the first part or half of their weekly session and then had learners use computers in the same room, where they worked for the remainder of the session with other learners.

Figure 9: Blended Learning in Meath



The tutors found that blended learning was also popular among learners as it afforded them a certain degree of privacy and confidentiality around their learning needs. For example, the use of headphones in the classroom helped ensure that when a learner required additional support from the tutor, they could ask for it and not have to worry about being overheard by their classmates. Blended learning is an attractive alternative when working with mixed ability groups as it allows each learner to work at their own pace and to 'personalise' their learning experience. One tutor referred to how writeon.ie was a great 'leveller' and that it brought all learners to roughly the same level by the

end of the project, something that had been previously very difficult to achieve using more traditional approaches to tuition and support.

However, tutors reported that learners involved in blended learning were interested in expanding their IT learning experience. Working on a one-to-one basis with their own tutor coupled with the additional support of a dedicated IT tutors in a group setting made this a very different learning environment.

Figure 10: Learners Supporting Learners in An Cosán



Tutors did try to encourage independent learning among the learners but this was curtailed largely through lack of access to computers outside of the learning centre. According to the tutors, the time spent on independent learning was hard to gauge and depended on whether the learner had access to a home computer. They reported that few learners had computers at home so this limited the ability to be able to work independently away from the classroom setting. The tutors also reported limited access to IT resources in local communities or through local libraries. Indeed, one local library had been vandalised. Therefore, for most learners IT learning happened in the learning centre only.

Tutors reported that:

- engaging in blended learning was a very effective use of use of learner and tutor time;
- The availability of accreditation is a great incentive to learners and that

'A cert means a lot to people who have no certification' (tutor)

- The website helps learners progress individually as the learner can see the progress that they are making;
- The majority of learners have improved computer skills and this in turn improves their confidence in their learning ability;
- Learners see it as a new way of learning. Using the computer takes the fear out of learning as learners are less worried about making a mistake on the computer, rather than in a classroom setting;

'Fear is overcome by using the computer' (tutor)

- The website has been used by tutors as additional learning to enhance the literacy skills of their learners. Aside from the improvement in IT skills, tutors have noticed the greatest improvement in 'listening and speaking' skills.

Suggestions for Improvement from Tutors

The tutors also had some suggestions for change to the website. These included the following observations:

- It is a very good starting point for learners but the website needs to be simplified in a few areas.
- When moving from page to page on the website, learners suggest having the words 'Next page' instead of the use of arrows.
- Pre-assessment was a bit long, it could take learners 2 weeks to do it.
- Learners should be 'warned' or 'encouraged' to complete each section before moving onto another.

Tutors reported some technical difficulties with the site and found this to be frustrating.

All of these comments have been taken on board and writeon.ie is changed frequently to reflect the experiences of its users.

The tutors reported that most learners 'love it' but that the website works best for learners who have advanced IT skills. Others find it a bit confusing and more difficult to follow than those with good computer skills. The majority of learners work in groups learning at their own pace, but there are a small number of learners who still require one to one support to get them to the same level as others in their group.

Overall, feedback from organisers and tutors was that blended learning is a 'fantastic' 'brilliant' and 'beneficial' way to encourage learners to learn while at the same time

improve their IT skills. They reported that it is a good way of teaching adults after the basics have been learned on paper. Learners 'liked' receiving points and the immediacy of achieving their goals - this provided motivation for them to continue learning on the website.

Figure 11: Learners at Work in Mallow



Section Two

Learner Profile

A total of 110 learners were involved in the Blended Learning Project. The majority of learners involved in blended learning were in the 36-54 age category. This is broadly in line with research that shows that most adult literacy learners in Ireland fall into this age bracket (NALA, 2011).

Chart 8 Age of Learners

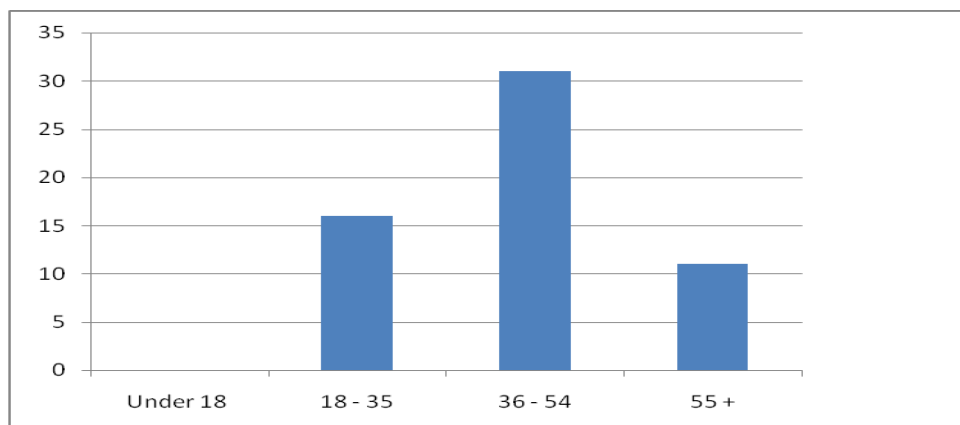


Chart 9 Learners' Education Levels

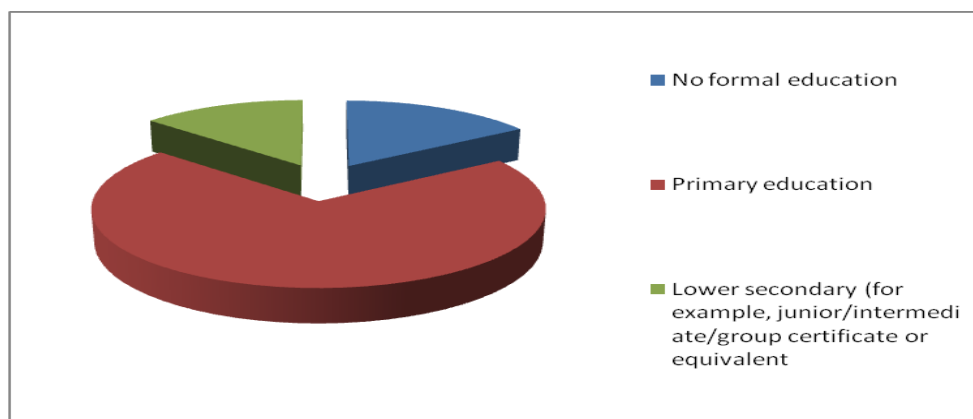


Chart 9 demonstrates that on entry to the adult learning service, the vast majority of learners have a primary education.

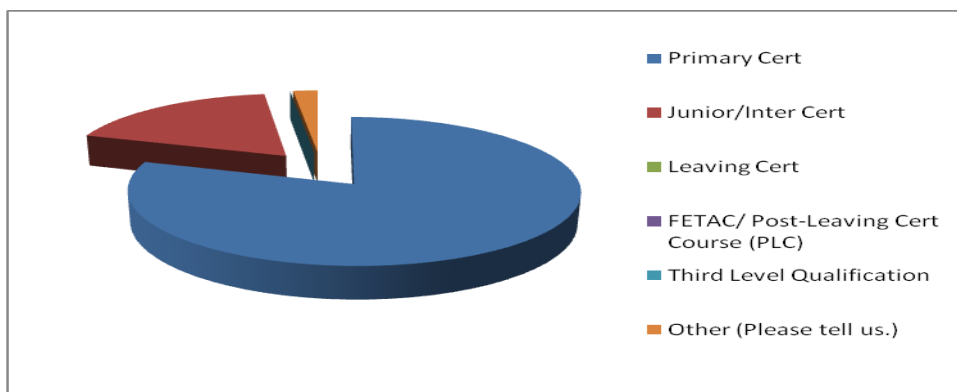
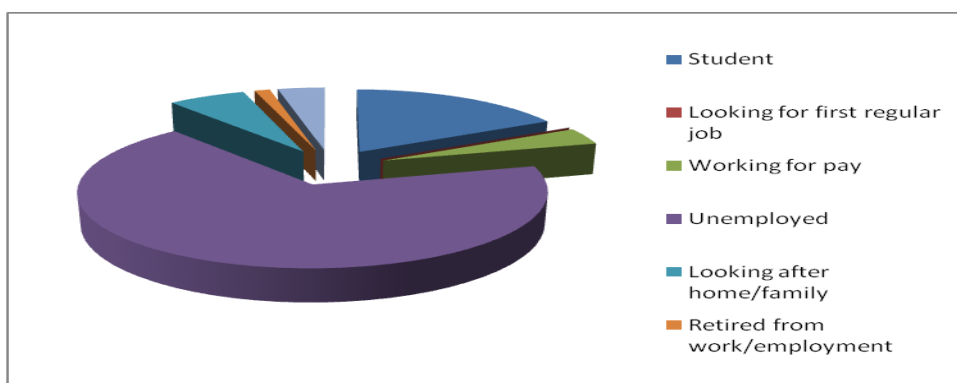
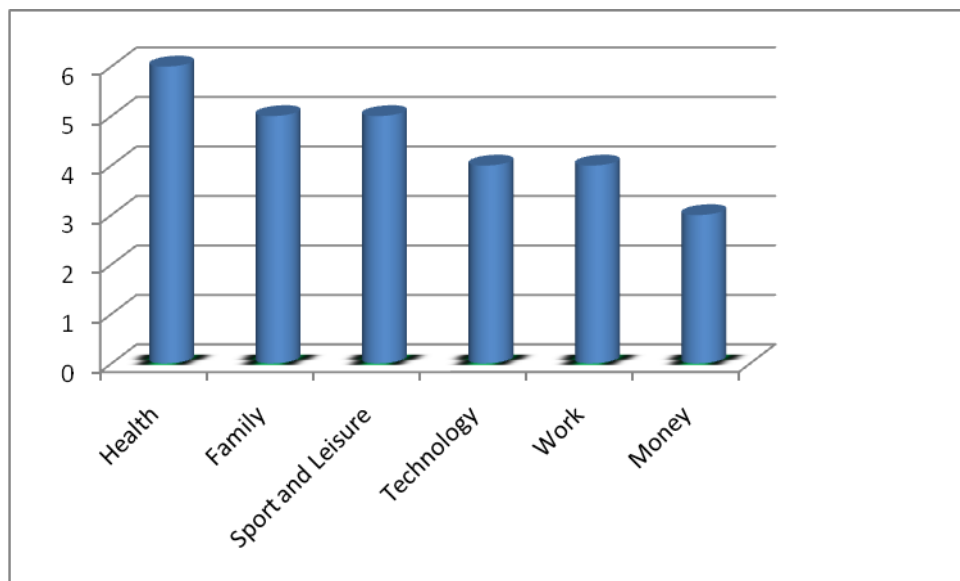
Chart 10 Learners' Education Accreditation

Chart 10 shows that prior to engaging in adult literacy the majority of learners have achieved primary certificate accreditation.

Chart 11 Learner Employment Profiles

The vast majority of the learners engaged in the blended learning programme reported that they were unemployed with the smallest numbers describing their status as working for pay or retired from work.

Chart 12 Topics of Interest

On writeon.ie, learners can choose to study through one of 6 topics. The outcomes remain the same but the context for the learning changes in an attempt to offer as much personalised learning opportunities as possible. Chart 12 shows that when it comes to topics of interest on www.writeon.ie, a majority of learners were interested in pursuing learning through the topic of health, with a relatively even spread among the other topics on offer to learners. Only the topic of Money scored on the lower end of the scale.

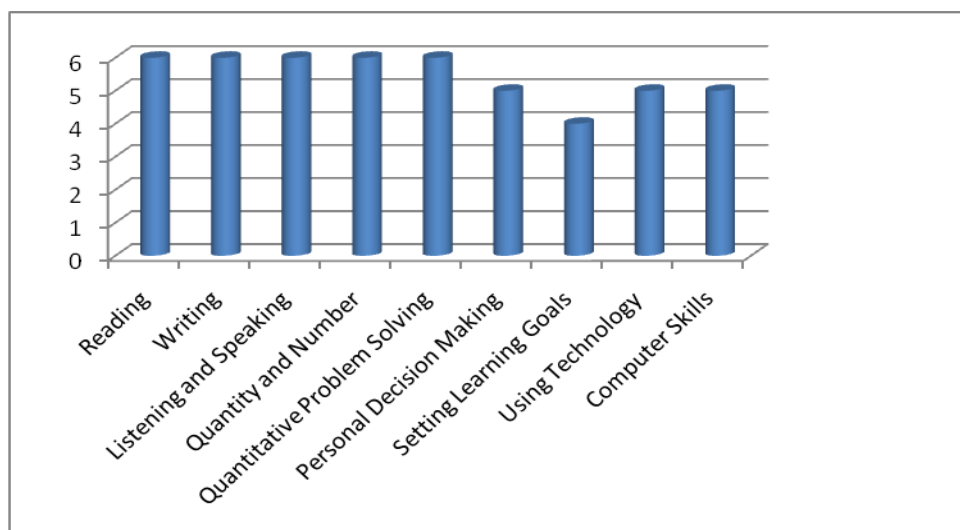
Chart 13 Areas of Interest

Chart 13 demonstrates that there is an even spread of take up in the minor awards available to learners. Setting Learning Goals was the award with lowest up take.

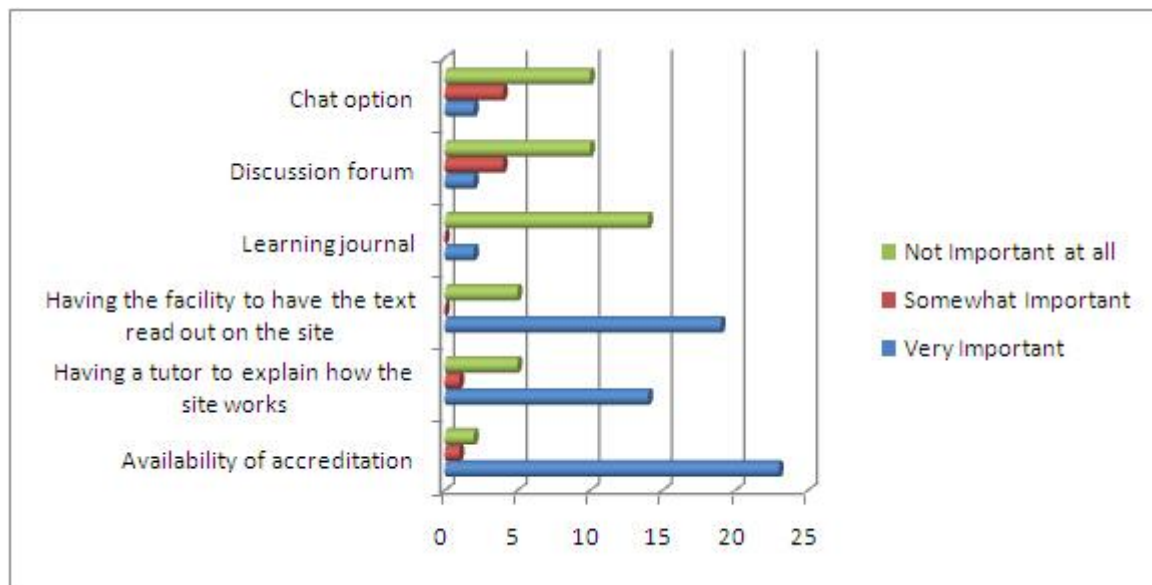
Chart 14 How Important are the Following?

Chart 14 demonstrates that the majority of learners rated the availability of accreditation as very important to them. This was followed in level of importance by having the facility to have text read out on the site and having a tutor to explain how the site works. The learning journal, discussion forum (Figure 12) and chat option were rated as least important by the learners.

Figure 12: The Write On Forum

Write On 3
helping you improve your reading, writing and number skills

Online: Suzanne, Joan M. Log out

Forum | New Topic | My Comment

Topic	Date	Comments	Last
solo users	15/11/10	6	03/11/11
rounding	23/09/11	2	22/10/11
Need Users for Usability Testing 28/12/08/11 September Dublin		2	18/09/11
How to upload videos on the Digital Media Portfolio?	28/06/11	7	24/07/11
maths	22/07/11	1	22/07/11
	22/07/11	1	22/07/11
reading	24/06/11	1	24/06/11
testing	13/06/11	2	24/06/11
The Weather	08/06/11	13	13/06/11
We'd like to hear your views and comments	08/11/10	5	07/06/11
FETAC MINOR / MAJOR	05/06/11	2	07/06/11
money	06/06/11	1	06/06/11
	23/05/11	3	31/05/11

Comment for Topic: solo users

NALATOM
03/11/11

Hi Dee,

We will be making some changes to the site over the coming months that will hopefully make the password easier to retrieve.

For now, if you can't remember your password, please feel free to call us on 1800 20 20 65. If you remember your nickname and when you last logged on, we should be able to give you your password again.

Kind regards,
Tom O' Mara
Distance Learning Co-ordinator

dee
02/11/11

Call NALA on 1800 20 20 65 for more support.

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Feedback from Learners

Adopting a Blended Learning Approach

In terms of satisfaction and engagement with the website, the feedback from learners shows that they found the www.writeon.ie a great starting point for learning how to use computers and to improve their reading skills in particular. They reported that the website was amongst other things;

'Handy for learning how to type and use the keyboard' (Learner)

'Great for starting out on computers and reading' (Learner)

'Great for learning English as an ESOL learner' (Learner)

I like writeon, it helps with my English. I worked with my daughter (8) and son (7) on writeon at home. The kids love it. (Learner)

'All the pages, doing the exercises, listening to story, I liked the reading exercises, I liked audio (visually impaired), liked all of it, working on computer skills' (Learner)

Usability of www.writeon.ie

The learners reported that they liked the variety of resources available on the site and that hearing 'the voice' as well as reading the exercise was a good way of learning and retaining information. As the last quote above highlights the audio function of the website is particularly helpful to learners who are visually impaired. However, some learners found the voice 'not clear', sometimes 'difficult to understand' and some of the language used 'jargonistic'. Some learners found the post-assessment function 'annoying' particularly as the error is not identified and the learner has to complete all the answers again 'even the ones I got right'.

However, they appreciated the fact that they could contact the NALA helpline if they encountered any difficulties.

The technology was easy to use a very good website. Good for reading and for getting used to using the computer. The voice was a little difficult to understand at first. The speaking and listening were more difficult but idea of calling NALA at end was great (Learner)

Overall, learners reported that they found the website useful on a number of levels. In particular it improved their computer skills and they liked that the site integrated reading and using computers. When asked how they would rate their literacy skills including reading, writing, numbers and technology skills since taking part in the blended learning programme the learners reported that they had noticed an improvement, especially in their computer skills. The learners also suggested that NALA produce a 'User Manual' to help them better understand the site.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to document how the literacy centres worked with the NALA's writeon.ie to deliver blended learning opportunities to adult literacy learners. The findings suggest that it has been successful in this regard. The research also shows how the work described in this report has been very successful in several ways:

- Centres and NALA collaborated effectively in providing additional flexible learning opportunities to learners.
- Centres found that basic literacy learners were interested in using ICT to improve their literacy skills.
- www.writeon.ie was proven to be a useful tool in providing accreditation options to interested learners, both from the learners and from the centres' viewpoint.
- www.writeon.ie was proven to be a useful reinforcement tool along with providing accreditation options to interested learners, both from the learners and from the centres' viewpoint.
- Learners' ICT skills improved as a result of taking part in the project.
- Blended learning provided a means of extending learning time and encouraging independent study.
- The approach allowed tutors to more effectively address individual learning needs in a group context.

Since this pilot project, www.writeon.ie has been used by **63** different learning centres across Ireland. NALA believes that the information in this report will be of value to practitioners interested in working in this area. The www.writeon.ie programmes at both Level 2 and 3 are on the FETAC Register for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report *Developing Recognition of Prior Learning* described the NALA RPL process available in www.writeon.ie as "an effective RPL mechanism", and recommended it as a platform for the development of RPL within further education and training services at Levels 1-3.

There are no doubt challenges to introducing a blended approach into the wider adult literacy sector. However, this study would suggest that the benefit to learners outweigh any challenges that may exist not least the costs and time constraints associated with training and supporting full time and volunteer tutors in the area of IT. There is clearly a lot more work to be done in terms of research around blended learning in adult literacy learning contexts. To this end, NALA is in the process of developing follow up research projects in the area.

In conclusion, the feedback from tutors and learners suggests they found blended learning to be a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face learning. In particular, it was beneficial to learners when it came to improving their computer skills. It also promoted the idea of independent learning, although this was curtailed due to the lack of access to IT resources outside of the learning environment. It can be argued that blended learning using the Internet is a relatively new approach to adult literacy learning in Ireland. However, it offers a more convenient, independent and flexible way of learning to adults literacy learners.

Actions

Learner feedback is very important to NALA and the DLS team is keen to listen to people describing usability issues with www.writeon.ie. Most of the concerns raised by learners during the Blended Learning Project were taken on board and addressed when Write On 3 was launched in October 2010. To name a few of the improvements:

- progress is now saved within lessons;
- there is a Help section with 3 videos explaining how the site works;
- the email function has been removed; and
- the logon process was amended.

NALA conducted a formal Usability Testing session with 15 learners on September 28 2011 and made particular reference to outstanding issues identified in this report. The result of this testing is that www.writeon.ie will be modified again at the start of 2012 to make it even more user friendly.

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