

Basic IT courses in Hull

A briefing paper

Iain Springate
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Introduction

In the pilot year of the Learners' Forum for Hull, research was carried out to find out what issues discouraged or encouraged learners to get involved in learning, and their motivations for engaging in any such learning. What emerged were many generic barriers and enablers that affected people's decisions across a range of different types of learning. However, alongside this there was a concern raised about the provision of basic IT courses that cut across different courses, providers and programmes of learning (e.g. CLAIT, ECDL, etc.).

There are many uses of IT now in learning, including distance learning over the Internet and 'blended learning' in the classroom, mixing different approaches, such as the use of IT teaching programs alongside lecture style learning. However, the learning

that people expressed concern about was what Fletcher (2001) defines as 'fixed learning', that is IT provision in a classroom for a set session. The courses were basic level IT courses that involved learning the fundamentals of how to use computers and common applications.

The report aims to set this issue in context, explaining the importance of IT skills to the economy and individuals, and some of the issues that emerge from the wider literature on IT based learning. Within this context, the data gathered by both the Learners' Forum and the Learning Attitude Survey in Hull will be presented. We will then list our conclusions and indicate a way forward to investigate further the concerns that have been indicated by learners in the pilot year of the Learners' Forum.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IT SKILLS

Computers are changing the ways that societies and individuals act across many aspects of life. Access to information is increasingly more available through the Internet, computers are being used ever more widely at work and in the home, and the same basic skills needed to operate computers are needed for other devices such as mobile phones and handheld computers (Dutton, 1999). As Brosnan (1998; 170) writes,

“...there can be little doubt that computer technology will play an ever-increasing role within our domestic, leisure and work environments.”

IT OUTSIDE OF EMPLOYMENT

As Walsham (2001) writes, throughout the 1990s there was an explosion in the use of computers and the Internet, both in the office and the home. In the home, Silverstone (1996) writes that this is for several reasons. One is the increased digitisation of information, with people becoming able to access information and services immediately by means of the Internet. The other is the fact that the computer, in some form, is becoming the site of all entertainment in a house, with games, music, television, and the possibility of information on other leisure activities available through a computer. So increasingly, individuals are facing the choice of gaining IT skills to take advantage of these developments, or of being left behind.

Statistics in the UK show that overall, use of IT in the home is growing. Recent research (Russell & Stafford, 2002) shows that the incidence of computer ownership has increased since 2000, with just over half of the population owning a computer. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) also found that the number of households who could access the Internet from home has also grown (ONS, 2003a). In addition to this, their research gave information on what people used the Internet for at home. Most people used the Internet for email (76%) and to find information about goods or services (71%). Just under half (44%) used it for finding education related information, and the same proportion ordered goods, services or tickets online.

Research in Hull (Humberside TEC, 2000) found that the majority of computer users at home (67%) did word processing, with the next most popular activity being games or entertainment. Only a fifth used it to email, and just over a quarter used the Internet at home.

IT AND EMPLOYMENT

In the UK, as in countries across Europe, the labour market is changing, with an overall growth in jobs that require higher level skills and a decline in jobs requiring lower level skills (Campbell, 2001). As Campbell argues, this process is being driven by the process of globalisation, the continuing evolution of new technologies and fluctuating patterns of consumer demand. The research stresses that nationally, IT skills are very important skills to have in these labour market conditions (Ibid).

The report of the National Skills Task Force (2000a) gives more detail on the importance of IT skills in the labour market, emphasising that “...there are few jobs that make no use of IT equipment in some form or another.” (Ibid; 139). Their evidence suggests that basic IT skills, for example inputting data and following on-screen instructions, are a minimum requirement for ‘employability’. In addition, the ability to word process, use email and spreadsheets are also prerequisites for many jobs, and they argue that this level of skill should be regarded as a core ‘generic’ skill as well. Clearly there are far more advanced IT skills that can be gained, but these tend to relate to specific occupations.

In addition, some larger employers are now using Internet or Intranet based methods to deliver training to their staff. Some of these companies, for example the accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers, have staff with a measure of IT skills already as they need them for their jobs (Sykes, 2002). However, other organisations that are doing this have a more variable level of IT skills. For example the NHS is developing the NHS University (NHSU, 2002). This aims to deliver learning to staff at all levels in the organisation. Therefore, for these staff to take hold of the opportunities presented through NHSU they will need some basic IT skills. As more learning is delivered in this way, and more employers use this method, it will become increasingly important for employees to have the skills to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them.

The importance of IT skills in employment is further underlined by the fact that in order to compete in a global economy, British businesses will need to have a workforce with greater IT skills than they currently have, and are required to have now (DfEE, 2000). Therefore, the onus is on businesses to recruit more skilled workers, or to train their existing workforce to higher levels, and also on individuals looking for work, to boost their skills.

In the UK, evidence suggests that IT skills are presently a skills gap in the workforce, as employers say that they are the main generic skills gap in their employees (National Skills Task Force 2000b).

So, nationally, the importance of IT skills for employment is clear. The local picture confirms this importance. Employers identified computer literacy as the skill most commonly in need of improving in their employees, with 31% saying this was the case (Humberside TEC, 1998). More recent research (Hull City Council, 2002) showed that computer literacy was still considered a skills gap by employers, and that over 75% of employers saw IT as important in the current and future competitiveness of their businesses.

Therefore, the local picture mirrors the national one; IT skills are important, and yet these skills are not present to a great enough extent in the workforce.

POLICY

The Government has developed policies to respond to the increasing skills needed to keep the economy competitive, and to ensure that people have the IT skills needed in the 21st Century. Examples have been the roll out of UK Online Centres, and the development of Learndirect. Policies link learning and employment together, seeing learning as a route into work.

The policies see IT skills as having the potential to work in two ways. Firstly, they recognise the importance of individuals acquiring the IT skills they need in order to gain employment and progress within employment. Secondly, they view IT as a tool by which people can be encouraged to gain other skills needed in the workforce. Clearly by doing this they will also be learning some IT skills as well. These views are reflected in many of the recent policy documents (e.g. Post 16 E-Learning Strategy Task Force, 2002; DELG, 2002). It must also be noted that these policies embrace the whole spectrum of IT learning, from the 'fixed' type considered here, through to distance learning over the Internet.

Whilst policies have expressed the importance of IT skills and the transformative power of new types of IT-based learning to increase people's skills and therefore enhance the competitiveness of the economy, some have criticised this approach. Based on research into the effectiveness of IT based methods of engaging people into learning, Gorard et al (2002) say that these methods can increase the participation of some groups in learning, but that IT is not a panacea to get everybody involved in learning.

INDIVIDUALS

Research also suggests that individuals recognise the importance of computer skills. Research from the DfES (Russell & Stafford, 2002) shows that home ownership of computers is increasing, as is home access to the Internet. The study also showed that a majority of respondents felt that computer skills are important for current and future employment. Just under half of the sample also thought that computers were 'very important' for life in general. Both these 2002 figures had increased since previous research in 2000. However, it's worth noting that in both cases indications were that those of higher 'social grades' (i.e. professionals or managers living in more affluent areas) were more likely to see computers as important, as were those who were younger.

There is evidence to suggest that this awareness of the need for computer skills in work comes from a perception about the changing nature of work. For example, more qualitative work (BRMB Social Research, 2002) found that a main motivation for going on basic computer courses was to improve the chances of getting a job. Their research indicated that this stemmed from an awareness that computer skills were needed across many different areas of work, and therefore were important skills for everybody to have.

Overall, then individuals are aware, and becoming more aware, of the importance of IT skills within employment and general life.

ACCESS TO IT

Although IT use at home and work is generally increasing, there are certain groups of people who are less likely to have access to, or use IT (Russell & Stafford, 2002).

Those who are younger are more likely to have used the Internet - 79% of 16-34 year olds have used the Internet compared to only 21% of those aged 55 or over.

Those living in more deprived areas are less likely to have used the Internet than those in more affluent areas. For example, 44% of those in Acorn classified 'Council estate high unemployment' areas have used the Internet compared to 86% in 'prosperous professional' areas.

Yorkshire and the Humber has a below average number of households connected to the Internet, with 35% connected, compared to a national average of 40%, and a figure of 49% for London (ONS, 2003b). At a more local level, only a minority of households (17%) have access to

the Internet in Hull, and only a third (33%) use a computer at home (Humberside TEC, 2000). However, it is worth noting that if Hull has followed national trends, these figures may have increased.

BASIC IT COURSES IN HULL

In Hull, then, basic computer courses are very important, as there are comparatively low levels of computer ownership and Internet access at home. Alongside this, Hull employers, like employers nationally, identify IT skills as something that the workforce in the city needs to improve.

Research by IT in the Community in Hull (ITiC, 2001) showed that there are many IT courses running in the city, run by different providers. The courses tend to be run free or at very low cost, and virtually all of them that emerged in the research were at the lower end of the skill level. Taking all the providers that responded into account, there were over 15,000 adults engaged in IT learning at the time of the survey, with the majority being at Levels One or Two. So there is plenty of provision, including different courses (e.g. CLAIT, IBT, ECDL) and different providers (e.g. colleges, community centres, schools).

There are a variety of different ways basic IT courses are provided in the city. These range from non-accredited courses such as 'Computers for the Terrified' which run for a few weeks to longer courses such as ECDL. Courses may be provided on a rolling programme where students can enrol on a course throughout the year, or the course may have fixed start and finish dates and students stay for the duration of the whole course.

Some providers run mixed classes where students are at different stages and working towards different qualifications. In other cases the class works together towards a single qualification. Class size can vary from one-to-one tuition to large rooms with large groups of people (30+) and several tutors. Across the range of courses and providers students tend to be given workbooks, which may be worked through in class or given to students to work from at their own pace with support from tutors.

Some of the more advanced courses are taught as a lecture – perhaps using interactive whiteboards, where students copy what the tutor is doing on their own

computer. Other courses may use virtual learning environments (e.g. Learndirect) – where the computer becomes the tutor, but this obviously requires the student to have some IT skills already.

The most basic IT courses are office/admin related courses such as CLAIT, Nicas, ECDL, and RSA's. Other topics such as digital imaging are likely to be taught on a workshop basis but aimed at getting beginners interested in IT. Introductions to the Internet and email are often given as 'taster sessions' to get people interested in IT. Drop-in sessions are held in many community centres with computers in-house, and courses can be run almost anywhere that is accessible to people thanks to wireless networks.

An important issue which has emerged through some literature on the experience of coming onto one of these basic courses is confidence. Brosnan (1998; 2) argues that,

“As new technology continues to proliferate through almost every aspect of our existence, a large group of individuals have been identified who possess a fear of this technology...it affects up to one third of the entire population...”

Whether or not this is overstating the case, it is clear that many who haven't used computers before and who go on basic IT courses are not confident in working on the computers. An evaluation of some of the UK online centres (Hall Aitken Associates, 2002) found that most people didn't feel confident in using a computer when they first came into the centre unless there was someone directly helping them. However, once people had got over this initial hurdle, and started to use the computer in sessions, the IT courses tended to increase their confidence greatly (e.g. Ibid; BRMB Social Research, 2002).

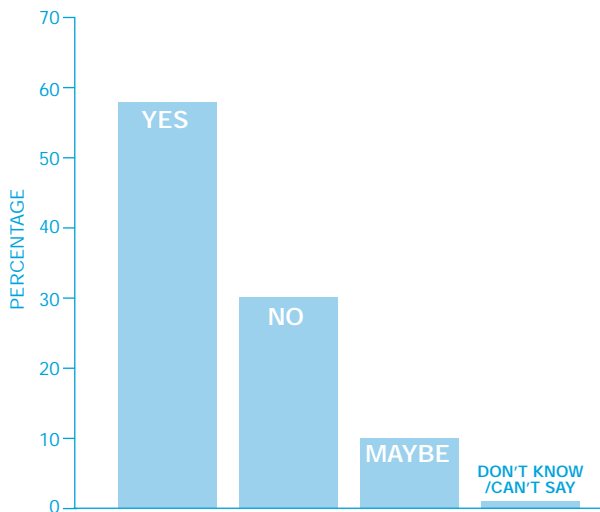
IT Courses in Hull - Findings from the SRB6 Pilot Year Studies

THE LEARNING ATTITUDE SURVEY

The Learning Attitude Survey was carried out by SMSR, and looked into the attitudes to learning of residents of Hull. Two thousand residents took part in the research, and there were several questions in the survey that indirectly pertained to the discussion of IT provision by revealing its importance to people.

The first relevant question concerned what people hoped to get out of any learning that they might do over the next year. They were asked whether they would like to improve their computer skills, and the results are below (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Whether respondents wanted to improve their computer skills



It is clear that the majority wanted to improve their computer skills through any learning that they might do. Only a minority, just under a third, said that this was not something they wanted out of any learning they might do. The fact that the majority indicated that they wanted to improve their IT skills shows how important these skills are to people in Hull.

Later in the survey, respondents were asked whether they wanted to learn in the next year, either for work or for fun. Just over half, 54% of respondents, indicated that they would like to learn something, and their preferences were explored further. When people were asked what they might like to learn for fun, the largest group of responses were related to IT matters, with just over a quarter (27%) wanting

to do some IT related learning for fun or interest in the next twelve months. The pattern was similar when people were asked what learning they wanted to do for work. Again the largest group by far (15% of responses) related to gaining IT skills.

Although only a small part of the survey, these results indicate that IT skills are seen as important by people in Hull, and that many who are going to get involved with learning in the near future will be doing learning that relates to IT skills.

THE LEARNERS' FORUM

Volcom carried out research into what residents of Hull thought about learning, specifically looking at barriers to learning, enablers to learning and motivators for learning. This was documented in the report 'Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn'. One theme that emerged across the research findings was dissatisfaction with the way basic IT courses were provided. The data below is the result of a more specific trawl of the findings with a view to pulling out and drawing together all the data relating to IT, and then carrying out some further research on IT provision in the city.

The data presented below needs to be read in the context of the full report, which fleshes out the context in which this data emerged, as well as explaining the methodology. The sample from which this data was drawn comprised 150 residents of Hull, from all areas of the city, and of a range of ages over 16. Out of this sample, 41 men and 33 women made comments about IT provision in Hull.

What emerge below are only themes that will require further investigation and clarification. There are no statistics as the original research was qualitative, based on interviews and focus groups. However, the themes do have resonance with other findings in 'Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn', and the issues presented below emerged across a range of ages, groups and providers.

Findings are presented with an explanation of the themes, and a number of illustrative quotes. The number of quotes does not indicate the number of people who expressed an opinion, as the criterion for including quotes is that they succinctly express the point without explanation.

The themes that emerged can be grouped under four main headings; motivations, the learning experience, advertising, and confidence.

MOTIVATIONS

There were three main motivations that people gave as a reason for their participation in IT courses. The first was using the qualifications gained to get a job. There was an awareness that IT skills were necessary for many jobs today, and people thought that it was an important skill to have on their CV as they were looking for work. As one person commented,

"[we] wanted to do the computer literacy as well, 'cos it's summat that's needed in just about every job now, you need your computer literacy, so we thought it was quite important. So we did those."

FEMALE, 28

Many people said that their primary motivation was to gain skills to get a job:

"To get into full-time employment, earning a reasonable wage, or whatever, getting yourself off flipping dole."

FEMALE, 35-44

"(The computer qualification) is sort of like a minimal qualification of working sort of in admin and when I found out I could do it here, it was alright."

MALE, 24

"(I chose web design because I) thought there were more jobs in it."

MALE, 25

"Well I just think, you know, it might help me one day to get a job or something. I hope so anyway. It takes time to learn it though, doesn't it? You know."

MALE, 23

Some people started on IT courses without being motivated by employment, but then found that those courses led onto other courses which helped them into a job, or onto a path towards a job. Others did not start courses with jobs in mind, but realised the potential of what they were learning for employment, and then utilised that learning to gain employment, or continued onto further learning with jobs in mind.

The kinds of jobs that people were looking for, and expecting to use their qualifications for, tended to be office based administrative jobs.

The second motivation for participation related to upskilling, as people sought to update their IT skills. Most of those who chose to go on an IT course for this reason were employed, and wanted the skills to progress in their current job. Again, part of this reasoning was down to an awareness of the importance of IT skills in the workplace. Examples of what people said are as follows:

"I've just been on two computer courses... [because] I've always worked in an office and it was just like to update."

FEMALE, 49

"The only reason I wanted to do that [computer course] was because, obviously I did IBT2, it was about 98 and 'cos of the jobs I've had since then I haven't touched like databases and spreadsheets, it's been more word processing. So I wanted to go and brush up on them."

MALE, 21

"Because everything's computers, everywhere you go, jobs, everything, computers, and the job I was actually in before I got the office job, you had to use computers to put your downtime in and your hourly figures, and so I wanted to be able to know what I was doing..."

FEMALE, 37

The other issue raised relating to upskilling was that people were aware of the pace of change with IT software and hardware, and were aware of the need to keep learning so that they were able to use up-to-date technology.

"So like obviously over the years, computers change, shorthand goes out the window, audio typing goes out the window, so I'm left with my RSA level I and II which was good, but wasn't good enough, so I had to go on to further."

FEMALE, 25-34

"[I aim] to carry on basically, keep your head up high, carry on, and like I said earlier, the computer line of it, everything changes from year to year so you've got to like, keep going."

FEMALE, 25-34

"There's always retraining in the computer industry, 'cos everything moves so fast."

MALE, 24

"...with everything that I've done on the course, it shows you how many changes there has been, you know in the year or so since I've not been working, so just getting up to date with those skills again has been a great advantage."

MALE, 39

The third motivation for participating in IT courses related to life in general outside work. People were aware that computers were used in all aspects of life, and IT skills were becoming crucial to many different aspects of life.

"I think now the worlds just going computer crazy, you need to know how to use them, don't you?"

FEMALE, 22

"The future is computers, isn't it!"

MALE 29

"..but I think computers are taking over. A lot of things now, even in shops, it's computers and all things like that, so I think it's technology what you need to learn...So, I think it's just a thing you need to learn because it'll be everywhere before long. Just to gain a bit of knowledge, I'm not saying I'm that good, but just that bit of knowledge in there, regarding computers, or I'll be left behind."

FEMALE, 36

"I suddenly became aware of the importance of computers. Everything these days has a website address, and banks and building societies tailor you to use them. You've got to be with it or understand it."

MALE, 70

Some people also specifically went on an IT course as they had a computer at home that they wanted to be able to use better.

"The skills yeah, 'cause I've got a computer at home and I use that quite a lot to manage my household accounts, any letters that I have to write you just do them on the computer."

FEMALE, 35

"I want to learn to use my computer, my lad bought me one. So I said I want to use my computer, I don't want it to just sit there and me just play cards with it..."

FEMALE, 70

"So I started just doing a computer course so at least I'll have something to say I can do.. I really took the computer course 'cos I got the kids a computer and I didn't even know how to turn it on. So that's how it all started and then I started the course..."

FEMALE, 40

"Cos I have just bought a computer, well I haven't just bought one, but I have one. I just want to be able to get whatever I can out of it...There are certain things I want to know about it, I'm not really interested in spreadsheets, I mean it would be nice but its good to learn that you don't delete everything by pressing the wrong button!"

FEMALE, 55-64

Other people participated in computer courses as they had an interest in computers. For example,

"But in the meantime, between now and then, I want to get into computers which I totally love."

FEMALE, 35-44

"Cos I've always had a great interest in computers and plus it was part of my daily working life anyway so the more I could take on board the better it would be."

MALE, 39

The last motivation for participation in IT courses related to interviewees' children. People wanted to know about computers so that they could help their children use them for schoolwork, and generally to ensure that their children were picking up IT skills. Again, this came back to an awareness of the importance of IT skills today.

"So I got all my qualifications for that and where my children come into it, is it's educating my children, my kids, through computers, because nowadays at every high school, its computers, so now I can actually - now - thought it was brilliant for me, so now I can relate back to my kiddies. What my kiddies don't know, I can tell them, what I don't know, the kids can tell me."

FEMALE, 25-34

"And then as me lad got older, I was helping him with his homework, and they were doing computers at school, you just feel like you can't help them. I can't help him with his homework, I'm no good on computers and then I thought, well I'll have to do something, try and keep him up to date with things."

FEMALE, 37

"[I got] satisfaction and enjoyment in the sense that, the children weren't that good on computers, I wasn't that good on computers, but I could try and teach them something that they didn't know."

MALE, 56

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Other findings indicated what residents of Hull thought about the learning experience on IT courses. The themes that emerged related to tutors, the group of learners on the course, the teaching and the facilities. In terms of tutors, there were two issues raised relating to the knowledge of the tutor and to tutors leaving and being replaced during the course.

In terms of the tutor's knowledge, a significant number thought that the tutor did not have great expertise in the subject. These people said the tutors did not know much more than them, and that this compromised their ability to teach effectively, to sort out problems when things went wrong, and to teach outside of the course material.

"I went to college, adult education, and I did CLAIT I and CLAIT II computers, and that was ok, she was quite good, but she was learning as much as we were, the tutor, so I mean she'd only just passed her CLAIT II when she was teaching us it, so she was still learning as well."

FEMALE, 25-34

"Well, the tutor was always late, she'd never taught it before, she didn't know what she was doing, she didn't have the equipment, she never had - she used to say 'put this disk in', and then she'd say 'oh no, we don't need a disk' but then you'd done half your work and you thought well what do I do now. It was very, very haphazard and I went three weeks, I thought I'll give her a chance, she's learning, you've got to give people a chance in life. And she was obviously very nervous. So I went for three weeks and I could not do it."

FEMALE, 35-44

"But I was in there, and they just put you in front of a computer and say right, follow the on-screen instructions. If you get stuck, there's no one to ask. Well, there is [a tutor], but he seems to know as much as we do. So it's like - I mean, I stopped going then because I thought well, what's the point?"

MALE, 25-34

"There's another problem as well, especially with ICT training, it's often done by people who don't know what they're talking about themselves. I mean I've seen it done where people are just reading out of a manual, and that's all they have to do to do it!"

MALE, 24

"As I say, just the computer systems, maybe the tutors could do with a bit more knowledge of computers. I mean most of the open learning tutors I mean, could do with a bit more knowledge. Maybe a crash course, and that's about it, I reckon."

MALE, 25

The other issue raised related to when tutors are changed midway through a course. This caused learners problems as different tutors taught things in different ways, and tutors changing disrupted the courses.

"The only problem is that the tutors keep leaving...and you get a new tutor. So I've had about four now. I've had four tutors now and at the moment there isn't one at all. Until the new term. So I don't know what's going on there at the moment."

FEMALE, 35-44

"It was quite disruptive sort of, you know, learning environment really, the tutor, you know, he used to turn up late...and you know, like three of the seven weeks he wasn't there at all and there was like replacements who never knew where we was. You know, it was complete chaos. I mean, half the class left. Nobody knew what they was doing. It just seemed like madness...I left in the end. I just felt like I was going backwards with it. And it was real hard to get back into it after loads of years, and I was just really put off the experience. I know that can't be how it is in all areas, but certainly for me."

MALE, 39

"I felt as though the teacher on this one, she didn't really have much time for 4 of you. I don't know she was always.. I know everyone gets poorly and that but she was poorly a lot of the time, and she dint really have much time for you, to teach. She just expected you to know it all. But I didn't know it all so I couldn't get through it. I did struggle with that one. But you can't know something if you don't get taught it. I know she did try but she want really helping me to do me best, I don't think."

MALE, 23

"...when we first started this computer course, we had [a tutor] to do the computer, but we had her because this other man was off sick, which was fair enough, but when the other man come he was showing us the computer this way, and [she] was showing us that way, and when we came out of the classes people were saying I prefer her way to what he showed us. As the course has gone on we got used to him and how he does it. I think that is one of the problems if you're getting somebody different. Each time showing different ways."

FEMALE, 56

Across the research as a whole, tutors were an important part of the learning experience. A good relationship with a tutor enriched the learning experience, and made it more effective. Learners wanted to know that their tutor was well versed in what they were teaching, and that there would be continuity of teaching. When this did not happen, as with the cases above, some of the learners did not complete the courses as a result.

The second important theme in the learning experience related to other people in the group of learners. This had a big impact on the learning. The first theme related to the number of learners in a group relative to the tutors provided. Where there was a high learner to tutor ratio, it was difficult for tutors to get round the whole group, and learners frequently had to wait a long time for help. In some cases they never received any help during the course of a session despite being stuck. The procedural nature of the learning, coupled with a common lack of confidence around IT, meant learners frequently required help, and weren't able to move on until they'd received it.

"Me and my sister went. And it was a Saturday morning and it was for learners, just to learn to start off on a computer. And when we got there, there was others there and we were the only two that had just started that day, the others had been a few weeks and known how to do it. And there was one lady that was teaching everybody. And we come out of there two hours later not having a clue because she didn't have time for us....There must have been at least 22, 25 [people]. And we kept asking people next to us which was really, it was too embarrassing after a while because they was getting on to things, logging

on I think you call it - is it logging on or something? - and they was doing fine and we're trying to watch what they're doing but we couldn't get to it....Well, with us two just starting that day, you know, we should have had more attention really, than the others, because at least the others knew what they were doing, you know, and they needed help now and again, I mean, but we didn't even know how to switch the bloody thing on!"

FEMALE, 35-44

"Say about 10, 15 [people]... we had the same problem there because it was an intense like 12 week course because it was all computer engineering and that...so the tutor was again struggling a bit to keep up....there's the size of the group and there's also - it's not easy learning something without somebody there you can go to."

MALE, 25-34

"...it's the ratio, if they changed, I mean you stick one teacher in a class of thirty people, they haven't got thirty pair of hands or they can't talk to thirty people at once when you're all doing different things..."

MALE, 21

"I think I wonder about the class sizes, like with the IBT 2 class. There's something like 30 students in there...And...It's hard for the tutor. Very hard, getting round everybody..."

FEMALE, 48

"I think there were over 60 machines. There were only 2 tutors though and this proved too much for them, they had too much to do. One of the problems was that the manuals that we were working from didn't have enough explanation in them, so we had to call the tutor, but the tutor couldn't see everyone and you had to wait your turn. But my only criticism was that there were too many people for the tutors."

MALE, 70

"There were too many of us, which was a bit frustrating if I'm honest. The tutors were great, when they could get to you, but you could sit for 5, 10 minutes, or you'd have to chase around, look I've got a problem..but that's only a small criticism because the girls were great and they tried to get around everybody, it was just too big..."

FEMALE, 63

People wanted smaller classes or more tutors; their issue was that they wanted to be able to have support from the tutor when they needed it, rather than having to wait for long periods of time, and then having a tutor try to help them who was clearly rushed.

These problems were often exacerbated by the mix of people in the group in terms of ability and programme of study. Firstly, there was often a mix of ability across the group of learners on a course. Some were more able and confident on a computer than others, and this made the tutor's job more difficult, as they were dealing with different levels of ability across the same work. In a large group of learners, this made a difficult job even more problematic.

"I think it was about 22 (people) in the end and there was only one actual tutor who was doing it. So it was really mixed people. It was all different levels. Some people had never used a computer, some people had been working with them for a year or so and just wanted to get their actual qualification so the tutor basically was just left, right and centre."

MALE, 25-34

"First of all I started at, you know the first course...and...I dint like the tutor there and he was like, it was a mixed class so, the people that he'd had before to tell you the truth, doing the course to suit them, they were quicker, and you could hardly hear anything. Every week I was going home and I'd only done half of the class that I'd wanted, then we'd go there next week and it was, oh this week were doing so and so. And I thought God I don't know anything and I'd been going for like weeks and I thought oh I aren't going back because I felt like I want getting anything out of it..."

FEMALE, 40

"I found that the tutor was finding the IBT2, she was finding it difficult because of how many people were on. We'd had no computer experience before... obviously IBT2 you need that little bit of knowledge. Either from the CLAIT or whatever, which was where she was getting beginners and that was a struggle, and she couldn't understand why they kept giving her, all these people. 'Cos it was supposed to be that you had to have done CLAIT before you did the IBT2, so everyone was at the same level and you can get on with it. Whereas she was finding that she was

being held back, 'cos she only had like 14 weeks to teach us, and I think personally she could have probably done with a couple of extra weeks to make up for these people, who weren't up to the level that everyone else was, and you tended to find that they dropped out as well, the ones without the knowledge, 'cos it frightened them, when it actually came to doing the work that we 'ad to do. It's quite frightening to them, 'cos they had no knowledge of what they were doing, and you found quite a few people did drop the course."

FEMALE, 28

The second issue related to the fact that people in sessions were often at different stages of the same course or on completely different IT courses. This meant again that tutors' jobs were more difficult, as they were dealing with people doing totally different things. Also, when people got stuck, they could not necessarily ask the person next to them for help, as there was no guarantee that they were even studying the same course.

"...that's another thing, you might be sat next to someone who's on a totally different course...And that doesn't help, I don't think...all different things going on, all in the same room, I don't think that helps the tutor neither, 'cos it sends her head all over, or his head."

MALE, 21

"But when I started CLAIT, people were at different levels and doing other courses, the ECDL, so people weren't all working at the same pace, which I wasn't too keen on."

MALE, 70

"There were various degrees, don't know how many, and [the tutor] tried to push (us) into different areas so that she could say I know they're all beginners, or advanced, and that's the only thing really. The tutors themselves were great, just that there were never enough instructors to give a hand."

FEMALE, 63

"Every single person in the room is doing a different stage or a different assignment, not one person in the class was doing the same thing..."

FEMALE, 32

There were other issues besides those above that were raised relating to the teaching of IT, but only the issue of pace of teaching emerged as an important trend across the data. The pace that the course was taught at was crucial to people enjoying the learning, and getting anything useful out of it. If it was too fast, people felt like they couldn't keep up, and if it was too slow, they got bored.

"I mean we were all pensioners but it was a bit fast."

FEMALE, 66-75

"I don't particularly like going to a class to learn computers because...well you know they're either going too fast or they're going too slow aren't they. Know what I mean?"

MALE, 29

"...he [the tutor] could only teach one thing at one pace, instead of thinking, well them three or four haven't been before so them we'll keep them on, well at least finish each task, and then they can come back next time, but it didn't work like that, it just put people off. 'Cos me and me friend, we weren't the only ones that dropped out the course, there was a few people who didn't know what they were doing..."

FEMALE, 40

"I could work at my own pace, I didn't have to worry, 'cos I am quite slow still, compared to.. I mean my husband finished the IBT2, three or four weeks before I did. But I could work at my own pace..."

FEMALE, 28

"Well I knew this (centre) was here and I just looked in the Yellow Pages and got this (course), and I like (tutor), she's nice, patient. You know when you get to my age it takes a long while to sink in, you have to do it a few more times than when you're 18!"

FEMALE, 70

Facilities for learning were also an important part of the IT learning experience. People expected there to be enough computers for all learners, and for them to run properly. When this was the case, people made passing comment that the facilities were acceptable. However, for some this was not their experience and it impaired their learning.

"And the other thing about (centre) is the computers are always failing. Yes. They crash all the time."

FEMALE, 35-44

"You get like a computer course. You go on one of the computer courses. There's maybe a dozen (learners) and a half of you turned up and there's only two or three computers... it's something that happened to my wife. And there was a shortage of actual machinery. So it's a matter of just standing there round someone who's on it, doing it, you know, explaining what they're doing. And it's a matter of remembering that before you go home to do it yourself."

MALE, 45-54

"The facilities are excellent, yeah, yeah there's more computers than people."

MALE, 39

"I mean I'd like more computers 'ere, bit out of date, they could do with updating a lot. I mean running Windows 98 with Office 2000, that is very slow. They could just do with updating the full lot....basically just the computers crashing at crucial moments, when you need them."

MALE, 25

"I found that a lot of the computers and stuff, they broke down quite a lot at (centre), there was always something wrong with them, and a lot of the keyboards.. it's a silly little thing but we didn't have them rest things underneath you know. I used to have to roll up a carrier bag to stick under it to keep it up, 'cos I can't type 'cos it's flat, and the majority of the keyboards were missing those. A lot of the mouse's don't work very well, so the equipment could need.. I know 'cos it's used so much and they can only replace it every so often but it's.. even just fix things so they can't be moved would be great. It's all silly little things really."

FEMALE, 28

ADVERTISING

A small number of people raised issues relating to advertising and information. Some felt that courses weren't advertised enough, and they felt that they'd been lucky to find out about the course they were on.

"Maybe how things are advertised (could be improved), maybe they aren't advertised enough, I think its people what have got to promote it rather than advertising. Somebody asked me today how did

I get where I've got, and the first thing I mentioned is the 12 week office project. Someone was asking me today do I think it was good, what did I get from it, and she was really interested in it. As I say if (friend) just hadn't have said on that particular day, well there's an office project upstairs, we never would have known about it, and we'd never have gone and we wouldn't be where we are now."

FEMALE, 37

"... I think there should be more of it (learning) and more people to be made aware of where you can go and get, you know, different courses and the like. Because I don't think a lot of people knew. I certainly don't, there's colleges and a few schools do it, but there's only 10 (people) on the course that I did at (school) and that was all that was allowed, and I got on it because I worked for the school. So I only got on that course 'cos I was there. It was hardly advertised."

FEMALE, 45

Others felt that a lack of sufficient information when they were enrolling had led to them joining courses that weren't what they thought they were, or turned out to be inappropriate for their level of competence.

"I wanted summat to do with computers, it was, it was literally that vague, literally like any computer course really, that sounded like it was what I wanted."

INTERVIEWER: And was that the course you wanted to do?

"When I did it, no it wasn't...IT sounds like, well it says Information Technology, that it's more technology based where (the reality is) it's just the software course."

MALE, 28

"So I started just doing a computer course so at least I'll have something to say I can do.. I really took the computer course 'cos I got the kids a computer and I didn't even know how to turn it on. So that's

how it all started and then I started the course and that was like, it took me two days to turn it on. I was going home thinking well I'm okay doing this bit of typing and this that and the other but the basic thing is, is what do you do if it's turned off, how do you turn it on. So then I started asking questions like that and it was like, "oh this really isn't the course for that" and it's like oh.."

FEMALE, 40

CONFIDENCE

Confidence was an important issue to those joining IT courses. Many of them had little or no experience with computers and were quite scared of using them. However, once they started courses, they tended to pick up confidence quickly as they gained competence.

"... when it comes to computers, I mean even them games, I'm lost."

FEMALE, 35-44

"I've never done computer in me life, you know, until I came here. I was scared to death of them but I've learnt computers, I've passed an NVQ course in CLAIT, administration, I've (gone to) College as well as here."

MALE, 45

"I was afraid that I may flop in front of other people, afraid that I'd make a fool of myself, not knowing anything, people always looking over my shoulder and watching everything I did, making all my mistakes, that was at the back of my mind. Now I find that everybody else is making mistakes. They're all shouting help, help, so we're all in the same boat, and those that are a little bit faster, those that can understand certain programmes and projects, they can help others that are not so fast, and they can help us."

MALE, 52

“Before I would not touch a computer, just in case I did the wrong thing, but the teachers have basically stated to me that it is very hard to actually damage a computer, or do something wrong to a point where they’re gonna...so, and I took an exam actually, on.. I think it was Friday morning, which I passed, got a hundred percent on that.... before I just wouldn’t have had a clue..”

MALE, 19

“Oh it’s positive, it’s like I feel now like I’m 10 times bigger than I was before I started the course. ‘Cos I felt like I couldn’t do anything, I thought well all I know is like shop work and factory work and looking after kids and parents. But how I feel like now, I feel like whatever it is I’ll give it a go, I feel quite positive, I wouldn’t think oh no, I’d think oh well give it your best shot you know, whereas before I would of thought, no I don’t want to try it. Well I will now. It’s made me feel a lot more confident in myself, towards challenges you know at work. I didn’t think that I would have ever been able to do them, but look what I am doing.”

FEMALE, 40

“Yeah I learnt a lot to do with the computers definitely. There’s still a lot more for me to learn but yeah, I learnt a lot. I’m not frightened of a computer as I was before, I use the computer a lot more than I used to use it.”

FEMALE, 28

“(the course) gave me a lot of confidence, a lot of hands on confidence. I was alright with word processing because I’d typed quite a bit in my life, but it just made me realise that when I went home I could do a little bit more with the computer than I’d done.”

FEMALE, 63

The themes that emerged regarding IT provision in Hull are explained above. IT was seen as important by many people, providing skills that are needed for employment, and increasingly for the rest of life as well. However, there was dissatisfaction about the provision, as people thought class sizes were often too large, and consequently they did not get enough one-to-one support. This probably reflects two things. Firstly, that most of those engaging with the courses were new to IT, were not confident with computers, and wanted lots of support. Secondly, the procedural nature of much of the learning, where people follow tasks and cannot progress if they don’t understand something, means that people were often left waiting for help. It is clear that IT skills are important skills for people in Hull to have, both from their own perspective, and in the interests of the economy. With the proliferation of new technologies in the home and the workplace, individuals are not only needing basic IT skills, but will need to continue to upskill as technology moves on. Only by doing this will they be able to take advantage of the new technologies and resources of the Internet in their general lives, and ensure that they are appropriately skilled to compete in a changing labour market. Hull’s economy also needs an appropriately skilled workforce in order to attract inward investment, and to grow new businesses, and IT skills are a major part of this.

The data from the SRB6 pilot year suggests that the basic IT courses are not proving effective for some learners, and that therefore they are not gaining the skills in IT that they want and need. This is clearly an important issue both for individuals and for the city as a whole. Therefore research should be carried out to focus in more depth on IT provision in the city, find out the views of Hull residents and see if they correlate with the indications that came out of the pilot year work. Specifically, this research would look at:

Expectations of basic IT courses, experience of basic IT courses, and outcomes of basic IT courses.

The overall objective would be to ascertain whether IT courses are meeting the needs of learners, and what the factors are that affect whether they do or do not meet people’s needs. Then recommendations can be made, if appropriate, that could make basic IT courses more effective from a learner perspective.

Bearing in mind the qualitative data gathered already which gives some idea of the potential issues, it is envisaged that the bulk of this work could be survey-based to generate a large sample. Therefore the results will be statistical in nature, rather than the qualitative data above.

MOTIVATIONS

The main motivations for participating in IT courses were to get a job, to upskill, and for reasons outside of work, such as interest, children, and home use.

People were aware of the importance of IT skills both for employment and life in general.

Many people were aware of the fast changing nature of IT, and the need to keep updating their skills

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Tutors were a key component of a good learning experience.

Some learners found that tutors didn't have great knowledge of IT, and this compromised the effectiveness of the teaching.

When tutors changed midway through a course this caused learners problems as different tutors taught things in different ways, and this tended to confuse the learners and disrupt their learning.

When there were too many learners for the tutors to deal with, this impaired learning, and learners were often left sitting inactive for long periods of time waiting for help.

IT sessions often had a mix of abilities on the same course and people on different courses. This made teaching more problematic for tutors, and did not help the learners.

The right pace of learning was critical to ensuring that learners did not feel left behind, or bored.

Facilities were sometimes poor, in terms of quality and availability of machines, and this impaired effective learning.

ADVERTISING

IT courses were felt by some to not be advertised well enough.

Some had experience of ending up on an IT course that wasn't what they had thought it was. More guidance was thought necessary to help people choose the right course.

CONFIDENCE

People often lacked confidence in using IT.

IT courses boosted people's confidence in themselves generally, and in their ability to use IT.

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