Developing an Engaging Virtual Action Learning Programme for SME Managers – A UK Perspective

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Abstract—**In this paper we present results from an EU-funded project with the aim of examining the adaptation of e-learning to meet the needs of managers in different contexts. A set of design considerations is elucidated. These principles were derived from an analysis of five completed projects. This was followed by focus group discussion in the UK to test the principles derived.. These focus group were planned so as to gain greater clarity in the design of e-learning programmes aimed at UK-based SME leaders and managers. This paper starts by looking at the importance of SME management development for the economic wellbeing of the community and goes on to review research into issues in engaging managers in development activities. The results of a review of an earlier experimental programme (ESeN) are presented as it formed part of the process which led to the identification of theoretical design principles then tested in the focus groups. Finally, recommendations are presented for SME e-learning providers as well as areas for further research.**

Index Terms—**SMEs, engagement, virtual action learning, trust**

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present the results from an EU-funded project looking at the adaptation of e-learning in order to meet learner needs in different contexts. The project involved an analysis of five completed e-learning projects which had focused on the development of the competencies of SME managers. Based on this analysis, a set of design considerations were elucidated. This then enabled a study of the extent to which these general principles fitted the local needs of the SME community and the development of recommended adaptations to the principles.

Reported here is a study carried out in the United Kingdom through which greater clarity was sought in the design of e-learning programmes aimed at UK-based SME leaders and managers.

The paper looks initially at the importance of SME management development for the economic wellbeing of the community and goes on to review research into issues in engaging managers in development activities. The results of a review of an earlier experimental programme (ESeN) are presented together with the identification of the design principles. These were tested by means of focus group discussions: detailed analysis of these focus group discussions form the basis of either recommended amendments to or emphasis to be placed on stated principles.

Finally, recommendations are presented for training providers of e-learning aimed at SMEs as well as areas for further research

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the 'systematic review' approach advocated among others by Pawson [1], the first step involved in the research was a review and analysis of the ESeN evaluation study and available documents, like for example minutes of Steering Committee Meetings. The purpose of the review was to identify what, was best practice in e-learning in the countries where ESeN was delivered according to the evaluation study and documents examined. However, the evaluation study presented a pooling of outcomes which were not tailored to the single countries but were recommendations applying to all the countries participating in the programme.

As our aim was to see 'what works, for whom and in what circumstances' [2; 1] we tested the set of principles in two focus groups with UK representatives of SMEs, intermediaries and providers in order to find out whether theory, i.e. the theory according to the meta-analytic approach as represented in the evaluation study, corresponded to the reality of what type of e-learning provision SMEs need in the UK.

III. THE ESEN PROJECT

A. A brief description of the project

As mentioned, the first step involved in the research was a review of ESeN, a EU-funded e-learning programme, in order to tease out lessons learnt and best practice according to the final evaluation study.

ESeN was a pan-European experimental project which had several partners and unfolded in different countries. One of the main outcomes sought from the project was the development of an innovative and engaging e-learning course adopting a blended approach (web-based resources plus face-to-face workshops).

Specifically, the project involved action learning sets in 6 different countries in the EU. It commenced with a literature survey of SME learning needs and the identification of a set of principles to underpin the design with adaptation to meet specific needs in each country. In order to engage learners, it was seen as essential that the outcomes had to be of direct relevance to the SME

managers in relation to the problems faced by the enterprise. The outcome was to be a plan for change in an area of organisational strategic significance drawn up by each manager involved. Given the experimental nature of the programme and its 12-week time frame, managers were not expected to fully implement the changes identified as desirable during the trial. However, they were encouraged to continue the process beyond the 12-week period.

Moreover, the action-learning programme was based on virtual working but did involve short face-to-face workshops at three stages during the 12-week programme.

B. The pedagogical approach and its underpinnings

SMEs differ from larger corporations in a number of ways and these impact on the training of managers. Research shows that involvement in competence development activities has a positive effect on SMEs' competitiveness and performance [3]. Despite this clear benefit, a study carried out by the British Chamber of Commerce identified that existing skill deficiencies in sales, management and administrative staff were adversely affecting competitiveness in almost a third of those small firms surveyed [4, 5]. Moreover, research by Smallbone [6] and Smallbone and Rogut [7] reported that increasing competition and internationalisation of markets are major concerns for small businesses, especially those in the new EU member states.

After considering the essence of the ESeN programme, its requirements, and the emphasis on collaborative learning and learning from experience [8], an approach akin to Revans' [9] work on action learning was selected by the Steering Committee comprising the project partner organisations (including training providers, organisational trainers and SMEs). In designing the action learning programme, four principles were considered essential for participants:

1. Each joins and takes part voluntarily;
2. Each must own a managerial or organisational problem on which they want to act;
3. Sets, or groups of action learners, meet to help each other think through the issues and create options;
4. Participants take action and learn from the effects of that action [10].

Indeed, recent studies recommend that full participation and engagement through active contribution to the learning experience is most beneficial to adult learning (see for example Beard and Wilson, [11]). This accords with the view that today learning from experience is allowing the transition from the course as 'knowledge production' to work as 'meaning making' [12], something considered essential if the learning is to result in positive changes to organisational practice. This view is reinforced by Beard and Wilson when they say that experiential learning, of which action learning is part, is 'the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment' [11: 19]. Hence, we agree with the authors that 'experiential learning… represents the transformation of most new and significant experiences and incorporates them within a broader conceptual framework [11: 19]. Action learning, or specifically virtual action learning since it was to be delivered online, was thus seen was seen by the Project Steering Committee as being the most

appropriate approach to meet the programme requirements.

Action learning groups or 'sets' made up of people having diverse backgrounds can be intellectually stimulating due to the extensiveness of inter-company exchange that occurs between the diverse company cultures present. Oliver et al. suggest that different backgrounds offer the best potential medium for stimulating cross-fertilisation [13]. Moreover, Hughes points out that 'working with strangers, individuals are more open and will self-disclose, or criticise their own organisation more freely than in a more familiar group. Because each member is ignorant about others' organisation, he/she is better able to ask penetrating questions, unhampered by beliefs about the insolubility or inevitability of others' circumstances [14]. He further suggests that the greatest difficulty in establishing such groups is that it always takes longer than planned. Another difficulty often encountered is that of defining a suitable problem upon which to work.

The requirements of the set advisor, facilitator or coach are described by Inglis as follows: 'Skilful, knowledgeable and resourceful [the set advisor]… is the general factotum who "services" the set' [15: 12]. In our case, the set advisor should know the action learning process and should steer the set through it. The advisor 'facilitates' in the sense of oiling wheels, procuring and briefing tutors, making external contacts, looking after the logistics, and giving moral (and sometimes material) support to the set. Although the set advisor may be very active during the initial stages, as the set moves further into the project and members start to take control of their own learning, the set advisor needs to assume a much lower profile [15].

Whilst it appears that there is a strong case for the adoption of action learning for SME managers since the approach addresses many of the requirements identified from earlier research, the project was based on the premise that virtual action learning would be much better suited. Some of the advantages of e-learning – such as flexibility, cost benefits, freedom to work at own pace, less disruption to work schedules – directly address the needs of SMEs. However, there are also some disadvantages to e-learning, among them the need for self-discipline, a sense of loneliness and dealing with larger quantities of electronic materials. Perhaps these are the reasons why a recent survey of management training and development in the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Norway and Romania found that 'as yet, little use is made of e-learning and it is ranked as the least favoured approach by both HR and line managers' [16].

It was also recognised that, when adapting an action learning programme to an electronic format, the pedagogic baggage that both tutors and learners carry can be a barrier to learning and resulting issues need consideration, as is developing different interpersonal tools of communication and style [17]. Ingram et al. also warn that care must be taken with both hard (hardware, software, administration, financial support) and soft (human relationships, communication, goodwill) critical success factors [18].

In order for learners to engage in collaborative learning, the participants must be willing to expose themselves and their companies. In this regard, Birchall et al. propose that

knowledge-based trust is important, particularly in the early stages of group formation [19]. Team members should be made aware of the experience and competence of each individual as it relates to the roles to be undertaken. The development of a team charter which explicitly identifies important types of team member behaviours has a role to play as well [19]. Moreover, a supportive climate where ideas are shared freely, conflict is based on the task and not on personality issues, conflict resolution is open and perceived as fair, and problem solutions are well understood and mutually accepted aids trust. Explicit verbalisation of commitment, excitement and optimism help create this supportive climate [19].

For SMEs in particular, research has found that the potential for knowledge exchange is highly dependent on the level of trust [20]. Senior managers in SMEs fear opportunistic behaviour from competitors and need confidence, either through trust or formal legal mechanisms, that other firms will be cooperative and not take competitive advantage of knowledge-based exchanges. When communities of practice reach across organisational boundaries, particular attention needs to be paid to building trust: van Winkelen found that sharing news, documents, questions and answers about important issues can be used to build trust and openness [21]. Personal information such as photographs and family information can also help build relationship.

C. Lessons learnt

At an early stage in the ESeN project, the partner delegates from the six countries involved met to identify and agree a set of design principles based on their background knowledge and literature searches. The eight principles listed below had a major influence on later decisions on programme design:

1. Design ways of working through the programme that can change and evolve;
2. Introduce external ideas to the discussions about how the group can be effective;
3. Allow people to participate in different ways;
4. Create public and private spaces for working/communicating;
5. Deliver value for everyone;
6. Combine familiarity and excitement;
7. Create a rhythm in the pattern of collaboration;
8. Adopt practices to make virtual collaboration successful.

Following this, partner meetings with their own local SMEs to ascertain their particular needs, led to the decision to adopt action learning as a common approach.

Given the innovative nature of the programme for most SME managers, as far as technology was concerned, it was decided to put an emphasis on developing meaningful interaction between delegates. The technology to be used for the delivery of the programme was chosen mainly on the basis of its flexibility, i.e. it could be tailored to suit the programme's needs. Consideration at the planning stage was given to the task design, the design of the groups, the process to be followed, facilitation of learning and the technical infrastructure. Following the trial period of 12 weeks, summative evaluation was undertaken using a questionnaire survey. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Whilst the response rate of participants to the survey was limited, it does give a number of pointers. Particularly noticeable is the score (mean 4.33 on a 5-point scale) given to the view that lessons learnt have applicability to the job role. This was seen as an encouraging outcome as one of the aims of the project was to improve the capability of participants to more effectively access and use tools for personal and team knowledge management to support their business needs. The contribution to learning coming from other SME managers was also found significant (mean score 4.00). But the environment clearly has to support this for such learning to be effective and hence one might assume that the overall mix of face-to-face and virtual learning did provide sufficient opportunities to meet personal needs. However, the response to virtual working is less positive (mean score 3.38). This may reflect the slow uptake of this during the life of the programme. However, it may also show that the benefits to SME managers are not so easily ascertained without more experience and development of competencies in using the medium. The extent to which participants felt a long-term relationship was developing which would help sustain their own business was limited as was trust between participants (as indicated earlier, something important in order to establish long-term relationships).

These data relating to the use of the online environments show us that although it had a degree of novelty, its use was limited and certainly the main benefit to SME managers from the programme seems to have been derived from face-to-face activities.

The implications of these resulting comments as seen by the investigators is that ideally more time than available in a single day kick-off needs to be spent on groups formation and relationship building in a face-to-face context prior to launching online discussion and debate. It may well be necessary to find levers to create the need for such discussion in an electronic environment – these groups appear to have spent their time getting to grips with the tasks and the basics of the technology and not to have been ready for any intense interaction using the web. Moreover, they did not appear ready to have the 'burning issue' for discussion necessary to entice them into the medium. This was seen in the evaluation of the programme as something that facilitators might pay more attention to in future programmes.

It was clear that technology is still, potentially, a significant barrier to effective virtual learning communities for SME managers. Also, maintaining the momentum of virtual action learning sets is an issue facing facilitators as is how best to deliver elements of the facilitator role, some aspects of which are a matter of timing

SME managers appear to have achieved desirable ends without engagement to any degree in a virtual environment. A summative evaluation based on the experiences of the facilitators showed that they felt somewhat inadequate in a virtual environment.

Overall, on the basis of what was identified through a review of the ESeN findings, one might see SME managers as being unclear of the benefits to be derived from virtual working, with facilitators unable to influence their engagement.

However, a number of key lessons were identified:

TABLE I.
OUTCOMES – QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY OF PARTICIPANTS

Question	Mean score: 1 Strongly disagree; 5 strongly agree	Standard deviation
Participating in the programme brought me into contact with SME managers who seemed to face similar business issues to me	3.83	1.05
I felt that contribution made by other SME managers during the programme were a valuable part of the learning	4	0.93
The programme created new links to other businesses for me which I am likely to maintain in the future	3.29	0.86
The balance between existing resources and discussion/interaction opportunities in the programme was about right	4	0.93
The programme was effective in creating trust between me and other SME managers	3.46	0.98
Online assistance was available between workshops when I needed it during the programme	3.96	0.75
I feel that completing a programme involving virtual interaction has helped me assess the likely value of virtual interaction to my business	3.38	1.24
Following the programme, I would consider using virtual interaction to extend the way my business networks with other SMEs	3.33	1.13
I feel the programme website gave me access to resources I wouldn't otherwise have been able to have access to	3.75	0.90
The tools and resources I had access to were interesting	4.33	0.70
The material in the SME programme was presented at the right level of difficulty/complexity for me	4.29	0.75
I feel I will be able to apply the things I have learned on the programme in my job/role	4.33	0.56
The programme offered me tools or learning which will make my business more successful	3.92	0.65
Things I have learnt from the programme will make me change some of the ways I manage in my business	3.83	0.96

1. SME leaders felt that engagement could be engendered through an active learning experience that they could relate to their own business situation and also through the networking opportunities from face-to-face workshops;
2. At early stages in the programme facilitators need to be actively engaging SME managers in virtual discussions rather than taking a more passive and responsive role;
3. The SMEs involved were aware of the experimental nature of the programme but nevertheless were intolerant of the few technical glitches, even though, when problems arose, there was a swift response from the IT supplier. This means that SME expectations of the technology need careful management or the risk is for them to become frustrated, de-motivated and disengaged;
4. The relevance to real business situation was felt to be of extreme importance for engaging the attention of the SME managers who were part of the programme;
5. Face-to-face events seemed well received and hence a blended approach was felt to be essential to engagement.

IV. TESTING THE ASSUMPTIONS

A. The principles

The review of ESeN through the analysis of its evaluation study and official meeting documents, allowed us to identify the key lessons outlined above and to identify a number of design principles which were felt by the study team should maximise SME managers' engagement in e-learning programmes. The principles are the following:

- Clear understanding of what engagement is;
- Just-in-time learning;
- Learning through being presented with real-life
- situations and authentic activities;
- The use of storytelling to add interest and stimulate discussions;
- Ensure that a supportive role is performed by e-facilitators;
- Ease of use and reliability of e-learning tools;
- Blended approach involving both face-to-face meetings and e-learning;
- Ensure that measures are taken to create and sustain a learning network to provide ongoing support for personal and business development outside and beyond the formal programme

These 'general' principles were then tested through focus groups in order to collect data which would either support or question their relevance and would tell us whether and how these principles needed to be adapted to fit UK SMEs' particular needs.

B. Structure of the focus groups

A workshop to review/validate the principles in the context of the UK SMEs was held. It involved 12 participants representing a cross-section of SMEs, intermediaries and providers who acted as knowledgeable key informants. The 12 participants at the workshop were split into 2 focus groups with whom we could inform and consult in order gain an understanding of how e-learning deliveries can be better tailored to fit the local conditions.

However, the participants were first of all asked to discuss issues concerning e-learning in their specific work environment and to also talk about the challenges they faced and the opportunities they were given. This gave a common language for the next part of the meeting. The

participants were then divided into two groups: this decision was mainly due to time issues and to the desire of having each principle discussed in depth by our key informants.

Each group had a facilitated discussion of four of the eight principles. With the permission of the each participant, the discussion was recorded, then transcribed and subjected to in-depth analysis to see what the emergent themes around the eight principles were.

C. Focus groups – The outcomes

The initial question posed to the group, at the plenary stage, was: 'What does e-learning mean to you? This enabled discussion and clarification around what differences there were in terms of the participant's understanding of the term?' It was immediately clear that for most participants the term e-learning covered all forms of learning delivered through ICT. As one participant put it: 'e-learning can even take place through the Internet, through video tutorials'; another one added that e-learning 'means learning delivered through IT… [however] IT people don't always understand learning principles, so they don't take them into account when designing programmes.' Once this had generally been agreed, the discussion moved onto the effectiveness of e-learning vs. face-to-face delivery. There was a certain agreement on the fact that e-learning and face-to-face somewhat complementary: 'one medium complements another: e-learning will simply be complementary to other forms of delivery' was what one participant commented. Another one added that 'as humans, we cannot NOT learn, so we will obviously learn something through e-learning, but we must see how effective this is compared to other methods.' Most participants felt that the interaction given by face-to-face teaching is important in the learning process. However, one SME manager also recognised that 'e-learning gives flexibility. Interaction is indeed important, but for time-poor SME managers the choice is between learning something or not, so e-learning is good for them.'

The discussion also led to a questioning of the effectiveness of e-learning as a standalone means of delivery, especially because, as mentioned before, it was perceived that IT people have a strong influence over the design of programmes and, as one participant summed up, in this case 'e-learning doesn't always work because it doesn't take into account behaviours and learning styles.' It was hence recognised the importance of pedagogical underpinnings for design and delivery of e-learning.

The overarching issue of **learner engagement** was the first theme to be discussed by the first group. As might be expected, it immediately engaged all participants in a lively discussion. Indeed, as one participant summed up, 'learners' engagement is very important… all other issues need to contribute to learners' engagement.' e-learning cannot be equated to reading 'documents' online – on the contrary, there should be an element of interactivity to it in order to engage the learner. Participants recognised that there is no point in trying to translate face-to-face learning into e-learning. Interaction and communication are possibly the main elements to keep people interested. Hence, in e-learning programmes, information must be delivered in a way that makes it easy for learners to understand it and use it. Moreover, the 'need to learn' was recognised as very important. Engagement 'through need

identification' was seen as having a big role in overall learner engagement. Besides, this identification of the need to 'fill a gap' is linked to business return: 'business return is a good motivator' is how one participant summed it up. This is directly linked to the relevance of learning to SMEs: it was recognised by participants that, usually, SMEs 'see learning as a waste of time, too theoretical and not cost effective.' So, in engaging learners there is an element of value for money, i.e. to get learning that can be put into practice.

All participants seemed to agree that the big step towards learner engagement is the individual's personal recognition of the need to learn, something which 'some SME managers don't recognise' at all. Indeed, all participants seemed to acknowledge that 'you learn something when you need to.' So, once the need is acknowledged, the prospect of the learning actually helping solve real business situations is a powerful motivator. Moreover, our focus group agreed that a development programme delivered exclusively in e-form is possibly not enough to stimulate engagement. As one participant put it: 'both e-learning and face-to-face are useful, a blended approach with online forums, the possibility of downloading material and face-to-face seminars' is certainly more engaging. Overall, this group did not seem very concerned about the latest technology being deployed in e-learning delivery: it seems that the main concerns were opportunity for immediate business return and the possibility of interacting with other learners.

Not surprisingly, the issue of **just-in-time learning** seems to be directly linked to that of engagement. As mentioned above, the group seemed to agree that a focus on identification of the requirement to 'fill a gap' and 'practical business return' are two powerful motivators for learning. Just-in-time learning, or learning what it is actually needed when it is actually needed, seems to offer an answer to these requirements.

In the SME environment, where the managers/owners do not feel they have the flexibility to take time away from their work in order to attend courses and training, nor are they willing to devote hours sitting at the computer to go through lengthy modules, just-in-time learning, broken into manageable chunks, could be the solution. As one participant put it: 'Short modules are good. An e-learning course should be broken down into short modules as setting aside 1 or 2 hours is difficult for SME managers.'

Also, the issue of learner engagement was linked to just-in-time learning during the discussion. In other words, just-in-time learning can satisfy some preconditions to learner engagement such as answering a real learning need and relating to real-life business experience. 'Learner engagement is bound to be superseded by just-in-time' is how one participant summed it up.

As already mentioned, participants saw the issue of **real-life business situations and authentic activities** as closely linked to the first two and they all agreed that this is indeed a very important element in engaging learners as it potentially is the answer to the powerful motivator mentioned earlier, i.e. immediate business return. SMEs want to see a practical and immediate return on business performance when they invest time and money in learning activities, hence real-life situations can make it easier to

transfer the knowledge gained to their own business situation. Also, one participant noted that real-life business situations and authentic activities can 'help people realise that they have a need' to learn. Indeed, when sharing real challenges in a learning group, the other members of the group can realise that they might have the same problems and that there is a gap that they need to address.

All this leads us to the importance of the **use of stories**. In this light, it is quite evident that stories can play a vital role when working with real-life situations. In the words of a participant, the use of stories 'is important all the time: not the words of the lecturer telling you the theory, but more powerful personal experiences.'

Participants also agreed that 'case studies can become bland' while personal stories are much more effective in relating a case and getting people involved and motivated. One participant related a real story of a successful virtual action learning community, where 'online action learning sets… put their stories online to share their approaches on what worked and what didn't.' It seems that the approach was very successful.

Apart from the human, personal side, the incentive of using stories might be seen in the possibility they offer to get real solutions to real problems.

In the second focus group, all participants appeared to agree that the **role of the facilitator** is crucial in a virtual learning community in order to engage learners. Indeed, as one participant summed up: 'The facilitator empowers the people in the groups to share. He [sic] acts as an enabler.' Although the role of the facilitator might not be seen as 'crucial in one-to-one… it is very important in groups.' However, it is also important to find the right facilitator for the course and to bear in mind that facilitators 'must have an independent deep knowledge of the subject.' Hence, it seems that facilitators, in order to gain the respect of the group, must be seen as 'experts'. However, all participants seemed to also agree that there should be a careful definition of the facilitator's role right at the outset and that this role should be 'built' into the design of the e-learning delivery. Even more, 'the facilitator should have an input into the design process.'

The **ease of use of e-learning tools** was seen as crucial as well because 'if they don't work, it is a waste of time that causes frustration, stress and impacts on motivation.' Time-poor SME managers, who want short and effective modules which can deliver just-in-time learning that can be easily transferred to the challenges the business poses, cannot afford the luxury of struggling with the technology. Participants agreed that many websites provide good examples of what can go wrong in e-learning delivery.

It was also stressed that sometimes new digital tools and applications are added to the e-learning programme just because they are novel and trendy, not because they are really needed.

Moreover, when designing a learning programme, it is necessary to take into account the learning route of the learner and knowing the target audience, exactly like in face-to-face delivery. The fact that e-learning programmes are delivered through digital tools does not mean that they automatically take care of the pedagogical issues. This is the reason why all participants agreed that knowledge of both the learning process and learning styles (pedagogy) is vital in designing a programme to be delivered online. As

one participant summed up: 'e-learning doesn't always work because it doesn't take into account behaviours and learning styles.'

Again, it was stressed that the facilitator, who should be familiar with principles relating to andragogy, should be involved in the design process from the outset.

Linked to the role of the facilitator and, to a certain extent, to that of technology, was the issue of **blended learning**. Participants argued that there are cases where online learning is not enough and face-to-face delivery is needed as well. As one participant pointed out:

'People have to absorb a huge amount of knowledge so it is useful to use e-learning for things like inductions for example, where it is also interactive. e-learning is useful when trying to teach compliance with requirements or to test that the required knowledge has been achieved. e-learning can reinforce knowledge because it is always there, available when needed.'

However, other participants added that 'face-to-face tutorials are very effective… it is important to learn within a community.' It was also pointed out that 'e-learning packages are, for example, useful to deliver courses on employment law. They can easily be updated with new policies: this shows that e-learning can be cost and time effective' but this must then be complemented by some face-to-face sessions which can give more in depth explanation of issues identified as particularly relevant during the online sessions.

The blended approach was seen as ideal because '[it] picks up how people learn… it satisfies everybody in one form or another… the blended approach gives time and space for various learning methods in the learning journey.'

The issue of 'learning within a community' and so of **creating and sustaining networks** in an online environment came up quite often during the discussion: 'finding a way of…creating social interaction that in face-to-face often happens around the water cooler' was seen as more than crucial. Indeed, the problem of the 'loneliness' of the learner in an online environment has been one of the challenges presented by online delivery. This was recognised during the discussion: 'creating virtual networks is challenging. Trust is an issue.' Moreover, even when a network is created by means of technological tools 'it is difficult to keep it going, it is not like shaking hands and seeing the other party.'

Hence, it was generally recognised that, in order to make the learner feel more engaged, 'it is important to learn within a community' and so care must be taken in order to make every possible effort in creating this community within an e-learning environment. It was generally accepted that trusting the other members of the community helps create and sustain the network. Reliability of the technology and a blended approach were seen as two crucial factors in creating and sustaining networks.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the group discussions on the general and specific issues, and especially on how to engage learners participating in an e-learning programme, the main points identified regarding SMEs operating in the UK are outlined below. These can be used to inform training

providers of SMEs on how to address specific e-learning needs in the UK.

The main issue recognised as leading the others was 'learner engagement' and how to achieve it. Given that much information and interaction is now online, there is a requirement for any e-learning programme to be engaging: if the programme is just 'e-reading' this does not necessarily translate into e-learning and it is unlikely that it will meet the learner's expectations of web-based activities. If the features of the e-learning programme fail to engage the learner, it is unlikely that deep learning will occur. Participants to the UK focus groups seemed to agree that an effective way to develop learner engagement is to provide learners with exactly what they need to fill the personal gaps they have identified. Hence, relevance of the e-learning programme to real-life situations is of paramount importance as it is the tailoring of content to individual needs. This means that care must be taken when putting together the 'set' of virtual learners: a preliminary needs analysis should be carried out and the group put together should be as similar as possible in this respect.

There is also a need to find ways to design, for SMEs in the UK, e-learning materials that are not only 'attractive' and 'interesting' but that also take into consideration the need for just-in-time learning. This is something which is particularly important for SMEs because they need to manage their time effectively. Small organisations cannot send their employees to courses and it is more cost-effective to present them with information in an effective manner in the workplace where just-in-time learning can take place and the new knowledge can be directly related to work practices: this way employees do not need to spend unnecessary time travelling to a seminar or a workshop when they realise that actually they could have all the relevant information they need in order to solve their specific work-related problems in half an hour if they look in the right place.

Also, a clear message which emerged in the focus groups is that real-life stories can help develop learner engagement. Capturing key messages to be conveyed in a story format can provide, at least initially, some context for the learning and indeed stimulate it.

The success of adapting e-learning depends as much on the national culture as it does on the culture of the organisation that wants to adapt it. One cultural issue that affects the way e-learning is being used by SMEs in the UK is the timing of provision: if training is provided outside business hours then it is difficult to get people to participate on a regular basis.

Lack of knowledge in using technology effectively does not seem to be an issue in the UK. SME managers in the UK were belived to be open to innovative technological ideas, online training, or using ICT in their business. However, British SMEs still prefer a blended approach over a pure form of e-learning, especially if there is evident mistrust towards the reliability of the technology being used and the security of sharing and learning online.

Access and affordability can be said to be another common problem within the UK SME environment. The lack of resources and lack of access to support networks within the UK context demonstrate the need to develop a database of information that SMEs can access any time. Through this database they will also be able to identify funding opportunities available to SMEs. The focus group discussions illustrated the importance within any e-learning programme of developing a centralised portal where participants can share information and tools. Moreover, by having the opportunity of accessing content that has already been developed, SMEs will be able to invest their time more wisely. This portal needs to provide the required security and safety to the registered SMEs and needs to be easy to use, interesting and regularly updated. Additionally, all content needs to engage the learner by using personal stories to present content and, possibly, real-life business situations which allow authentic activities. According to our focus group participants, this is a much better way to engage the learner.

Finally, it seems that the best approach is blended learning, where both face-to-face and online methods are used, rather than online courses by themselves.

VI. FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

These principles for design to achieve learner engagement seem to ring true for UK SMEs, trainers and providers, although within the ADAPT project, of which this research is part, a comparative study will be undertaken to compare the outcomes of the focus groups held in the partner countries. This will enable a more detailed review of aspects of culture and environment whish impact the applicability for the principles in different contexts. However, it is felt that the approach to and investigation such as this could be applied to any group; it is important, though, to get data in each specific context in order to design the e-learning programme effectively.

For the SME managers who acted as our knowledgeable informants, the desire to tap into tacit knowledge seems important if not paramount: text books do not give them the kind of insights they need for decision-making and therefore the action learning approach seems to appeal but the electronic version is lacking in appeal perhaps because tacit knowledge is not easily shared in an electronic environment, particularly if asynchronous. Consequently, a better understanding of the constraints could result in designers being more realistic in their expectations about the use of such systems by such groups of learners.

Also, there is a need for more research looking specifically at how learners respond when programmes adopt these principles – do learners engage more effectively? And what do they actually mean by engagement? And more importantly, how can one measure it and its impact on learning?

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