

United Reformed Church: Task Group on Developing Blended Learning

The United Reformed Church Education & Learning office has been working since 2009 on having some online learning presence for the denomination, and toward that end, established a virtual learning environment based on Moodle in 2012. This is called URCL. The platform has been used since its inception as a network of networks for practitioners in discrete groups of work within the URC. Apart from *Training for Learning and Serving* (TLS), it has been used less as a learning environment than as a sharing environment. The Education & Learning Committee has taken the view that it is time to develop a robust virtual learning environment which can contribute to varied blends of interactive learning opportunities offered through face to face and online means for a range of learning groups.

The *Learning Church.Next Chapter* process initiated by the Education & Learning Committee highlighted the potential and current issues around online learning within the United Reformed Church:

2.4 E-Learning and Social Media

E-Learning is a mystery to nearly all of the URC. A toe in the water is as far as it goes. Vison4life offered one small step, with a menu of resources available through the dedicated website for the three years of Bible, Prayer and Evangelism plus an extra year of material. An evaluation judged the material to be well used across the Church. Another initiative is the webinar courses hosted by the Director of the Windermere Centre. People are already using the benefits of Facebook and Twitter to improve communication and interaction across their networks. URCL, the URC Learning Environment, has been a struggle to establish and to use. As yet, it is mainly a tool for the learning networks, particularly TLS. It has the potential to offer a wide range of resources for the whole church, but it is under-resourced, in terms of staff and finance.

The expertise to design and develop E-learning is not yet identified in the URC and will be costly to develop. The dominant attitude at present is that it is very limited in its scope and there is a strong preference for person to person learning environments. This contrasts with the global experience of mass availability of learning opportunities, e.g. MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses. An example of a learning resource available freely is wwwFOUNDATIONS21.net provided by the Bible Reading Fellowship.

Any e-learning that is more than just material available to download and use by individuals or groups, needs to be supported by a tutor and should have interactive capabilities so that learners can share with each other as well as the tutor. The work at present nearing completion on elders training might be a prime candidate for adapting to e-learning. How e-learning complements other learning needs to be explored. 'Blended learning' is common practice and should incorporate e-learning.

Recommendation 5.

A Task group should be established to explore the development of e-learning particularly, but not exclusively, within blended learning. It should identify practical ways to build on present experience and practice, by drawing together those involved in TLS, TDOs, CYDOs, RCLs, MEs, with some experience and commitment to on-line and e-learning, as well as others in the wider church, ecumenical partners and an expert in the field. Its remit should be to bring further proposals to Education and Learning Committee.

The response of the Committee at its meeting in January 2014:

Action: A Task Group along these lines will be established, and will be a place where the costs and benefits of e-learning in theological education can be evaluated. Elizabeth Gray-King (URCLE Manager) and Fiona Thomas have already discussed this, including the name of a possible Convenor, and some potential external experts. Neil Thorogood, Lawrence Moore, David Salisbury, and Sue Matthews expressed interest in being involved in the Task Group. Progress on establishing the Task Group will be reported to the E&LC in May 2014.

The Education & Learning Committee is now establishing the task group, which will be expected to propose strategies to the Committee and to monitor their implementation. The initial life of the task group will be two years from its first meeting

Purpose

To take a strategic overview of e-learning and how it may best support blended learning within the United Reformed Church, with particular reference to the benefits and interactions of both users and providers of learning opportunities.

Practices

The task group will:

1. Identify practical ways to build on present experience and practice of blended learning within the URC
2. Study blended learning networks in a range of environments and denominations to ensure best practice, to collaborate to best effect and to learn from other developers
3. Ensure effective and robust links within the whole of United Reformed Church web capability
4. Ensure effective and user-friendly interaction for students and tutors
5. Ensure effective and robust technical support, including server capacity, software updates and security for any platform the URC chooses for its virtual learning environment (presently Moodle)
6. Make a recommendation to the Education & Learning Committee on what should succeed it after two years.

Personnel

Convenor

Secretary for Education & Learning

Education & Learning Programme Officer/URCLE manager

Resource Centres for Learning representatives

United Reformed Church Communications & IT staffs

Relevant Synod representatives (TDO/CYDO)

TLS representative

Moodle advocate/experienced practitioner(s) as seem appropriate

e-learning advocate/external adviser(s) as seem appropriate

E Gray-King, Education & Learning Programme Officer

F Thomas, Secretary for Education & Learning

9 April 2014