Online Learning for On-Board Training Officers

Helminen, R. & Karkama, M.
University of Turku, Centre for Maritime Studies

Abstract

This paper describes a Finnish project on developing a blended learning approach to training the merchant marine On-Board Training Officers. Maritime Education and Training is regulated by the International Maritime Organization's Code on Seafarer’s Training, Certification and Watchkeeping. On-Board Training comprises one third of the Deck Officer and Engineer studies. There have been problems in arranging training for the On-Board Training Officers that are responsible for supervising the Maritime Academy students on their shipborne On-Board Training. A blended learning approach was applied in order to enhance the accessibility and content of the training for the On-Board Training Officers. The combination of classroom teaching, a CD-ROM study material, a website and an Internet-based discussion forum turned out to be a promising method to serve these aims. However, some interesting development options still remain open for experimenting.

1. Introduction

In Finland, the training programmes for the Merchant Marine Deck Officers and Engineer Officers at the Operational Level require studying for approximately three years. The professional subjects of the training are strictly regulated by the international IMO (International Maritime Organization) STCW Code (Seafarer’s Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Code).[1]

Almost one third of the training programmes mentioned above is used for On-Board Training (OBT). The students are sent to merchant ships to obtain training and experience in the tasks, duties and responsibilities of a Deck Officer or an Engineer. A Training Record Book is used to control and guide the OBT periods. In addition, OBT must be closely supervised and monitored by qualified officers aboard the ships in which the approved seagoing service is performed[2]. OBT is part of a Maritime Academy's training programme and it is subject to the quality system required by the IMO [3]. To harmonise the training arrangements, the Finnish National Board of Education supplemented the Maritime Education and Training (MET) curricula with the recommendations on arranging OBT.[4]

In the Training Record Book, the On-Board Training Officers are instructed mainly to inspect the training record book in order to check progress already made. The Training Officer must also make entries and evaluations to state whether the prospective officer (student) can be considered competent in the various training tasks.[5] The On-Board Training Officer also supervises and guides the students in general terms, e.g. that they are given the mandatory Safety and Shipboard Familiarisations, and that they learn to follow the rules of the shipborne working and social community. The On-Board Training Officer communicates with the shipping company and the Maritime Academy to ascertain that the On-Board Training is organised smoothly and efficiently.

2. Recent problems in training the On-Board Training Officers

From the autumn of 1998 onwards, the On-Board Training Officers have been trained to their duties by arranging short courses, lasting from one to three days. In such a short time, only limited pedagogical skills can be transmitted to those responsible for the students on board. Furthermore, the participation rate to these courses has not been as high as expected. There have been mainly two reasons for the situation. Firstly, the regulations of the STCW do not require a certificate for obtaining the status of an On-Board Training Officer. Secondly, the seafarers cannot participate in classroom teaching as easily as persons in shore-based professions. Even the scheduling makes the organising of a classroom course for this kind of a target group very difficult. Meanwhile, the improved Internet connections on board and in ports, as well as the computer skills of the seafarers made a new course design feasible. Therefore, the blended learning was seen as a solution to arrange the training course for a larger group of interested On-Board Training Officers.

3. The project for revising the On-Board Training Officers' training

3.1. The project organisation

The training of On-Board Training Officers was developed by establishing a project, the pilot courses of
which were organised by two Finnish vocational institutes and Centre for Maritime Studies at the University of Turku. In all, five courses were organised in 2001-2003.

3.2. Course structure

The new course applying the blended learning approach includes one day of traditional classroom teaching, CD-ROM study material for autonomous studying and the web-based learning environment.

The classroom teaching covers the main themes of the On - Board Training and introduces the later course elements based on autonomous studying and e-learning. In the classroom, the participants have also an opportunity to get to know each other, which later helps to start up the discussions in the web-based learning environment.

The CD-ROM study material includes mainly different text documents which go deeper into the themes that were dealt with in the classroom. The course's CD-ROM includes also a study guide to e-learning. All material is in both official languages: in Finnish and Swedish.

The third element of the course is web-based learning. The On - Board Trainers' web-site provides up-to-date information in easily adopted form such as descriptions of the tasks and duties of the different players involved (e.g. trainee, Maritime Academy and On - Board Training Officer), topical question-answer lists, forms needed in training etc. The website is equally available for course participants or any other interested reader.

The learning environment used in the five courses was WebCT. The only reason for choosing this learning environment was that it was made freely available by the University of Turku. The features used in the learning environment comprised the discussion forum and the self-assessment test.

The multiple choice self-assessment test was used mainly to motivate the students to go through the study material whereas the discussion forum was intended to generate the dissemination of good OBT practices adopted on different vessels and to highlight the current problem areas. Changing opinions in discussion groups is essential for learning since there is no recorded data on different practices in different vessel types related to the lately reformed OBT. The moderated discussions provide new information to the course participants as well as to the Maritime Academies. This information could hardly be shared during the classroom courses.

The course had no final exam but the students were asked to fill out a form were they recorded the time spent on CD-ROM and web-based studying. In the discussion forum, the activity of a single student could be seen from posted notes and student specific data was available in WebCT statistics, as well.

3.3. The lessons learned

The two-year project was aimed at testing the suitability of blended learning for training the On - Board Training Officers. The project was also intended to give experience of e-learning for vocational institutes that so far have not applied e-learning in adult education. In all, the concept proved to work fairly well. However, some aspects need consideration and better preparation in the future. The e-learning skills of the tutors at the Maritime Academies and the skills of the students need special attention. Many of the participants have not been “at school” for many years, and have poor e-learning/distance learning skills. The tutors need also more practice in moderating group discussions. The moderating task was an extra duty on top of the normal teaching, which partly may have had an impact on the level of moderating. Moreover, the tutors did not usually have a clear idea about the amount of time the planning and tutoring altogether takes.

3.4. Future developments

The experiences in the project showed that the blended course model suits well to the needs of the seafarers. The future developments concentrate on improving the On - Board Training Officers' website, especially the topic-related question database. Another feasible improvement could be organising the present shore-based classroom teaching at the workplace (i.e. on board a vessel), which would make participation in the course easier.

4. References