

## **Digital Threads: Training British Asian women in the use of advanced computerised sewing machines**

Wardleworth Community Centre, Rochdale and Community Grid for Learning (CGfL)

### **Background**

'Digital Embroidery' is a Workers Educational Association (WEA) adult and community learning course provided as part of the 'Digital Threads' project. The course involves the use of digital sewing machines, acquisition of basic ICT skills, searching the Internet for design patterns, digitisation of these patterns using a scanner and interfacing new design patterns with the digital sewing machines. It is accredited by Greater Manchester Open College Network at Level 1 Credit 1 Embroidery, and at Level 1 Credit 1 Computing.

Students are women of predominantly Bengali, Asian Pakistani and Asian Kashmiri origin, some with language and literacy difficulties. One of the participants on the course has now set up a business and many are taking advantage of study support in literacy that is provided as a part of the course, or in additional sessions at the centre.

### **Established practice**

The project started with a few open day tasters funded by the WEA. Initially, the focus was on basic embroidery techniques, and sessions were three hours in length with two hours focused on embroidery and one hour on computing techniques.

### **The challenge**

There was a need to bring in more culturally relevant material to the training activities. For example, the machines were pre-programmed to depict Disney cartoon characters, and in addition, a number of problems had to be resolved before students could attend and achieve accreditation. Some women could not get permission from their families to attend community centres; a separate Women's Centre was required in addition to other community centres in the area; others needed crèche facilities before they could take part. Language barriers had to be overcome and the right kind of balance established between the embroidery and ICT components of the course.

### **The pedagogical approach**

The centre is equipped with wireless laptops, computerised sewing machines, some of which can be used to input digital scanned images, a scanner and a projector for demonstrations by the tutor. Learners are able to search the Internet for patterns, then digitise the images using a scanner and feed the image into the sewing machine using a 3.5 inch disk adapter. Formal training is offered in the use of technology, e.g. a mouse, a keyboard and a search engine to locate patterns on the Internet. CGfL and WEA resources, which include interactive games and sewing-oriented materials, were used to engage learners.

Learners are not pushed to complete a portfolio. A student's comment reveals that the course employs a mixture of 'guided discovery' with appropriate follow-up training and support. "We get freedom to browse...." However, some embroidery sessions are more formal and follow an 'apprenticeship' model. Overall, the course uses a blended learning approach, mixing self-directed Internet-based activities, peer-tutoring and tutor direction in the use of the sewing machines.

### **The intended outcome**

The Women's Training Initiative coordinator, Rehana Mohammed, has the goal of bringing women into the centre by providing activities that are culturally relevant to them, overcoming fears in the use of computers, and incorporating basic skills training in literacy, numeracy and ICT into courses in embroidery.

### **The e-learning advantage**

The students start with Disney-oriented materials because these are provided by the digital sewing machines (e.g. Mickey or Minnie Mouse designs on clothes for children). However, the games and sewing-oriented materials in the CGfL offer an alternative. One learner mentioned to Rehana that the CGfL game 'Tools and Equipment', which is linked to digital embroidery, was now being used at home by the whole family.

The Internet also has the potential to open up a 'whole new world' for learners and to cater for a wide range of cultural learning needs. The students have a real sense of excitement about using the Internet and scanner. In one session, they were able to take ideas from Indian fashion websites for their own embroidery designs. Rehana noted how the Internet enabled all age groups to progress: "If the student is very young, I show them stuff on the Internet that appeals [to them] such as fashion, beauty, music, but it should be all based around their own culture. You need to consider your target group and make sure they [tutors] are aware of the specific cultural needs of the learners."

Figure 1: Some examples of embroidered designs produced by students in the Women's Centre.



### **Key points for effective practice**

- Good relationships with schools and nurseries can ensure that courses can be integrated easily into learners' lifestyles.
- Wireless laptops enable learning to take place wherever the learners can attend. Partnership-working with the CGfL enabled the Women's Centre to acquire the technology.
- A project coordinator is needed to manage the technological aspects and to take the equipment from site to site.
- The Internet can be used to engage a wide variety of learners and to locate culturally relevant learning materials.
- Learning support for language and literacy problems can be integrated into provision.
- The confidence of learners can be built up through peer-mentoring – two learners from the class have now registered with the community centre as voluntary tutors.
- Accreditation through the Open College Network can enable learners to acquire basic skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT alongside their chosen topic of learning.
- Avoidance of a 'push for accreditation' is essential, but coordinators also need to make sure that opportunities for portfolio development are easily available when the learner is ready.
- Progress needs to be evaluated day by day; start small to see how learners want their course to develop.

### **Additional information**

The Wardleworth Community Centre is located in South Street, Rochdale, Lancs. As a result of the course, large numbers of women have been encouraged to engage in classes for the first time and to achieve Open College certificates for their work. Many of these have been presented by their local MP.

### **Talkback**

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