

4: Pre-course workspace for entrants to Initial Teacher Training courses

Name and role

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Background

Institution: Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes located in an urban multicultural and multilingual setting in a post 1992 university.

Learners: New entrants to full-time teacher training programmes (graduates, some recent some career changers) with wide range of IT skills from basic to expert. All judged at interview to have personal and intellectual qualities to become a teacher (criteria for admission to ITT programmes). All trainees are pursuing Qualified Teacher Status through the Secondary Post Graduate Certificate in Education PGCE or the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP).

Learning Environment: Invitation only workspace based on wiki technology hosted by pbworks, for which a subscription is paid. The workspace combines the 'flip chart' style virtual pages with the recently added feature of posting comments thus resembling a social networking interface.

Mode of Delivery: Distance learning before programme starts. Mix of self-paced, group and cohort learning, tutor supported and autonomous learning.

Intended outcome(s)

To deliver induction information and preparatory learning activities to those who have been offered a place for Secondary Teacher Training Programmes at UEL. (This has been the vehicle for induction information and learning since 2006). i.e.

- To disseminate key information to intending trainees effectively and efficiently.
- To facilitate collaboration between the University of East London (UEL) central services, secondary ITT administrators, tutors and our future trainees.
- To provide networking and communication with and between offer holders as well as with their tutors.
- To enable offer holders to acquire and develop online social and communication skills.
- To help admin and academic staff as well as offer holders to understand the potential contribution of collaborative online technologies to learning and the student experience.
- To give future trainees a positive experience of collaborative online learning using a Web 2.0 platform, thus modelling the future use of such technology on their teacher training programme and its potential use by trainees with pupils in the secondary classroom.

The challenge

- A specific driver for the original Pre-Course online workspace – was a campus closure (July - August 2006) and subsequent move to a new campus which was predicted to lead to disruption of administrative systems (IT/phones/post) and lack of availability of specific timetabling information until later in summer.
- Changes to national funding arrangements for ITT trainees (fees, loans, differentiated bursaries according to subject specialism).
- Dissemination of induction information for an increased range of secondary subject specialisms and ITT programmes.
- Maintenance of responsive information service to future trainees due to lower levels of administrative and academic staffing during summer (periods of annual leave).
- Mobility of future trainees in terms of travelling abroad, moving out of term time addresses etc which leads to communication difficulties.

Established practice

Our traditional induction packs sent out from the end of June to early offer holders include generic programme information, typically information about programme dates and financial information for applicants but as subject lines increased, each one needed slightly different induction information to be disseminated to trainees. There are also many enclosures including booking forms for pre-course events, subject specific information and bursary forms, some of which apply to some groups of trainees but not others. This places a huge burden on administrative staff with the compilation and distribution of induction packs. The risks of mistakes are high. These could prove costly if intending trainees were sent the wrong enclosures, i.e. bursary information for a different subject area. Additionally many contact details, e.g. addresses held on application forms prove to be out of date as recent graduates move back to parental homes or travel.

The development of the workspace enabled us to create a range of generic pages applicable to all our future trainees as well as programme specific pages and subject specific pages which are easily navigated via a side bar. This information is now available 24/7 from anywhere in the world where the user can access the internet. Indeed tracking statistics show that our site was accessed last year by future trainees who were in South America and Australia for the summer period.

Additionally receipt of a posted induction pack leads to isolated trainees, possibly apprehensive about the course and who they will be working with (tutors and fellow trainees). The Pre-Course workspace leads to networking opportunities for offer holders with those involved in their future training.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

Affordances of using technology:

- Development of sense of community through development of a networked interactive space.
- Familiarisation of trainees with Web 2.0 technology which is used extensively once on programme. A chance to 'play' with the technology in a risk free environment.
- 'Always open' environment accessible from anywhere in the world.
- Opportunity to learn from others (tutors, fellow trainees).
- Financial savings on photocopying, postage costs and economy of staff time in collating complex induction packs.
- Increased responsiveness to future trainees' needs through forum and facility of easily updating information as and when required.
- More intuitive searching of information through hyperlinks and links to external resources.

- More effective preparation of trainees through pre-course collaborative tasks, e.g. debates, creation of 'wordles', preparation for professional studies themes and issues as well as subject based preparation.
- Increased inclusion as electronic material can be manipulated both by the contributor and the reader to meet their learning needs, e.g. documents adapted in font size and backgrounds, podcast with transcripts, visual material as well as the written word.
- Increased quantity and variety of induction material available (although this can lead to users, particularly late recruits, feeling overwhelmed).
- Increased personalisation and differentiation as learners navigate and select reading material and tasks according to their level of ability and needs.

Key points for effective practice

Careful selection of learning platform: The following should be taken into consideration:

- Reliability of workspace and ease of access.
- Level and quality of support provided by the 'supplier'/host of the technology.
- Stability and ease of use of 'shell' provided.
- Ease of use - editorial change to style and layout of pages.
- Subscription costs for a 'private' workspace.

This workspace project is relatively low cost financially but is high cost in terms of staff time. (We chose pbworks.com as our preferred platform).

Factors to be taken into account by:

Lead Tutor: Initial start up time needed for design, information collection.

Time needed for monitoring and maintenance of site.

Faculty/School Admin Staff: Need time for training on workspace (a wiki), updating of site information and daily maintenance.

University Student Services, Admissions and Enrolment staff: Need to be familiar with workspace in order to provide up to date admissions and enrolment information.

Academic Staff: Need to provide updated reading lists, course outlines, and answer subject specific questions on the Wiki Forum. Need to contribute resources to as well as to monitor and assess learning activity. Need for training on design of site.

Intending trainees: Access to internet. Confidence using IT and contributing to on-line discussions. Risk of inadvertent or deliberate/malicious changes to pages of key content.

All stakeholders need motivation and confidence to contribute to workspace.

Key future actions

1. To pay further attention to the design of the site for ease of navigation by future trainees as some reported concerns about feeling overwhelmed and lost as the size of the workspace grew over the summer.
2. To include a rationale for not using an established social networking site such as Facebook for our Pre-Course site. We decided we could not be seen to be modelling for future teachers due to legitimate concerns around e-Safety in schools.

Actions to avoid pitfalls of online collaborative work (based on experience and Weller, 2002 p.70)

'Invitations'

- Prepare a 'welcome letter' with a step-by-step instruction sheet with screenshots explaining what the workspace is for and how to join.
- Be clear in introductory letter about the usage expectations, e.g. Does everyone have to post messages and contributions? How frequently should they check the workspace?

- Give the users an ice breaker activity to engage learners from their first log in. Tutor monitors participation and encourages users with welcoming messages/responses to messages.
- Keep everything simple especially in the early stages so that the learners become used to the technology before introducing any new tools or expecting use of additional technologies.
- Monitor individual activity through tracking tools to check response to invitation to join workspace and subsequent participation. Take further action in case of non participation, e.g. resend invitation and instructions. Contact them by phone to check if there are any problems.

‘Activities’

- Emphasise the collaborative nature of activities at the outset. Be clear about the objectives of the collaborative activity – the outcomes are about the process not just the product.
- Briefly explain the rationale for collaborative tasks and how they contribute to the individual’s learning, e.g. through exposure to the reflections and discoveries of others and the impact of having to formulate one’s own thinking in writing to share in clarifying individual’s thoughts and learning.
- Address any cultural bias or prejudice against collaboration by explaining that on the course trainees are not in competition with each other. Trainees enter our ITT programmes from a wide range diverse backgrounds and educational experiences.
- Ensure in task design that there is something for everyone to do.
- Release new activities over the summer period so that users keep logging in.
- Intervene or get leader to intervene if task going off track.
- Debrief activity with students with responses which emphasise the learning that has taken place.
- Emphasise the feed forward.

Online Behaviour

- Establish communication ground rules and norms at the beginning by posting an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) or Netiquette document. Ensure AUP covers issues such as e-privacy and e-copyright. Model these expectations in tone and content of all postings and messages. Contact privately any participant who transgresses these rules and have a ‘take down’ policy for any document or posting which does not comply.
- Organise any collaborative tasks in concise clear language with a worked example for learners to follow. Define responsibilities and length of expected contributions clearly.
- Tutor presence in the background monitoring interactions with regular timely, prompt interventions if necessary to ensure focus and standards of behaviour maintained.
- Organise tutor and administrator rota for cover during periods of leave. Inform users on occasions when lead tutor cannot respond or monitor as sometimes lack of tutor intervention can cause anxiety amongst rest of cohort and lack of focus/possible ‘moaning’ about lack of answers. Reasons such as leave or no internet access for a set period are more reassuring to group.

Break the cohort into smaller groups or ‘teams’

- Build group dynamics (secondary subject specialist group/ future professional studies groupings) from the start. Loyalty to the group can be built and then ‘guilt’ about non participation can be a powerful motivator. People normally don’t like letting others down.
- Ensure that students let others know through a posting if they will be absent or are on holiday. This stops others wondering what has happened.

Conclusions and recommendations

The use of the wiki seems to have had a positive impact on administrative workloads. An interview with an experienced secondary administrator indicated some evidence to show that over the past 4 years the use of the workspace has been effective in reducing the number and also the length of calls from the new cohort of trainees. Administrators could tell callers where to find the information on the wiki rather than engaging in longer detailed conversations. The web-based information pages also reduced the risk of wrong information being given by inexperienced, possibly temporary, administrators.

Interviews with wiki users when on course also indicated that the format of hyperlinked web-based pages and documents led to a more reliable, comprehensible and intuitive flow of information rather than a large envelope full of different letters, information sheets and forms. There appears to be some anecdotal evidence from this project to support the view that as tutors and administrators have to pay attention to the design of wiki pages, there is less text to absorb. Information is broken up into 'bite size' portions and the reader can follow a pathway more easily through information via the hyperlinks and sidebar rather than leafing through sheets of paper trying to find the relevant 'bits' although every year a few trainees report that there is too much information and too many activities for them to digest effectively.

In our 2010 Pre-Course Workspace survey, administered before the start of their initial school experience, the vast majority of trainees reported that they appreciated the opportunity to communicate, and express ideas and views with other trainees before the course started, that they were more confident in their use of this technology as well as more confident in their online communication skills. A clear majority stated that they had learnt more using this induction site than they would have from a traditional induction pack of documents but some would have liked to have received both.

Given the relatively short duration of each year's project, it became clear throughout the project that the secondary team needed to monitor the site daily, in order to answer questions or amend unintentional changes to the workspace being made by inexperienced users. There have been no instances of malicious changes being made to the workspace over the 4 years and each year there have been about 250 users. The evaluation data received determined that the site had relevant content which was communicated clearly to intending trainees and that they were able to access the information easily.

Each iteration of the Pre-Course Workspace has included more comprehensive information, all subject tutors and administrative staff now contribute and more collaborative tasks take place. The content and layout of the site was developed by the secondary Initial Teacher Training (ITT) teaching team to meet our needs and the perceived needs of our future trainees. Our experience of this technology is confirmed by the experience of other educators:

“...the users decided for themselves how the wiki would fulfil their objectives. Technical support and training was minimal: at most, one hour of instruction was needed, and in most cases, orientation was handled by a single email. Even confirmed technophobes have grasped and mastered the system quickly. The structure of wikis is shaped from within - not imposed from above. Users do not have to adapt their practice to the dictates of a system but can allow their practice to define the structure”. ([Lamb, 2004](#))

Additionally it would seem that the use of such technology is having an impact on recruitment. One would-be trainee identified the impact thus: “It was an important factor in my decision to come to UEL”.

The use of Web 2.0 tools has also had an impact on the practice of academics, administrative staff within the team as well as the practice of many of our trainee teachers. Subject groups and their tutors have increased their use of technology starting in the centre-based components of their programme and continuing to use them to share learning amongst trainees when they are on placement in schools.

In our 2010 survey, 60% of the cohort, felt that it had made them more likely to use collaborative technology in schools and with a sizeable proportion of the 'unsures' not wanting to commit themselves until they had experience in school. Since then tutors are reporting increased use of these technologies by our trainees and that trainees are influencing their school based mentors to adopt the tools not only for their pupils' learning but also for their professional use. One whole school and another school department have set up micro-blogging areas for staff communication having seen our trainees benefitting from this technology.

In addition to providing a lively and interactive space for future trainees, one of the aims of the project was to discover if positive experiences of Web 2.0 technologies would lead to an increased appreciation of their potential in learning and that trainees would be more likely to adopt them in planned learning experiences for pupils in schools.

Trainees were surveyed at the end of their 2010-11 programme to find out if their experience had led to more use of technology with pupils. 59% of the cohort reported that they had used new technologies with their classes. Within the 41% who did not, a few identified that some schools would not allow them to use other technologies.

These figures compare well with research data reported by Crook and Harrison (2008 p.5), in which a far smaller number of practising teachers claimed to use Web 2.0 tools:

- 12% of secondary teachers surveyed had uploaded a video;
- 9% had written on a discussion board;
- 6% had edited a wiki;
- 4% had created a social networking profile;
- 9% had created or added to a blog.

As further evidence, here are some responses from the trainee teachers in the 2011 end of course survey about which tools they had used with pupils:

"I used flip cams along with imovie and music software to make music videos. Movies were then uploaded onto the school's MLE."

"xtranormal and prezi were both used in the classroom."

"flip cameras with pupils when they are evaluating and improving their performance"

"... Made me unafraid to have a go with new technologies in the classroom with pupils..."

"Yes I gained confidence in using the IWB as well as vodcasts, blogs, screenshots, podcasts and wikis."

"Podcasts, wikis - pupils enjoyed these"

"flip cameras and Fronter"

"Survey Monkey - Introduced the software to Year 10 group for their GCSE project"

"QR codes- Showed a couple of A-level students QR codes. One of them utilised them in his final project."

Overall the positives far outweigh the negatives and Ofsted commented in their 2008 report on our provision that the imaginative development of innovative practices such as the use of virtual environments and web-based learning was a Key Strength. *"The development of web-based technology allows trainees to complete online tasks and get to know each other, and their tutors,*

before the course begins. Trainees participate enthusiastically in this virtual community and group cohesion is established early.” (Paragraph 11). In 2010 Ofsted recognised: “the innovative and very effective use of resources to support and enhance trainee outcomes” as a key strength again. (Paragraph 25).

Additional information:

Sources

Learning platform used for Pre-Course Workspace:
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**Additional information:
Screenshots (from 2010) showing higher level skills**

As a result of use of tools such as Wordle, Wallwisher and Voki, we found future trainees also using these on their group pages plus finding new tools to test for themselves.

