

8: Utilizing a variety of Web2.0 tools to support the professional ('distance') learning of trainee teachers on Initial Teacher Education programmes in Post-Compulsory Education and Training

Name and role

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**For the purposes of the Case Study presented here I am the coordinator of this work and author of the e-learning tools and learning objects in question.*

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Background

The Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) programme at the Cass School of Education, University of East London, prepares both pre-service and in-service trainees for employment in the lifelong learning sector in England. Approximately 40 trainees each year are taught on the one-year full-time PGCE pre-service programme, with a further 40 trainees on part-time routes lasting two years. The part-time programme represents a mixture of pre-service and in-service trainees and both PGCE and Cert. Ed. representing, perhaps, a much fairer reflection of the diversity associated with employment in the lifelong learning sector as a whole.

The blended/e-learning tools explored herein adopt various Web2.0 tools, technologies and platforms, while being used across all PCET programmes and have been designed specifically with the part-time cohort in mind. This cohort meets for formal sessions once a week, during term times for two-years. Each session lasts twilight/evenings for 3 hours. Compared to the full-time cohort, these learners are very much 'distance' learners. Having said this, with the emphasis upon professional 'learning-in-the-field' and the importance of time spent on placement as *workplace* and also *work-based* learners, all ITE trainees (full-time and part-time, in-service and pre-service alike) can be seen as 'distance learners' for the majority of their training programme. With the needs of these learners in mind, and the fundamental interconnectedness of many aspects of the teaching craft, Web2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, micro-blogging and podcasts have been adopted to offer support and guidance and to extend distance and workplace learning.

The PCET programme at UEL is also part of a much larger collaborative community with provision taking place across 6 other institutions accounting for a further 200 trainees, the majority of whom are in-service and training within their own workplace. The Web2.0 tools used here – purposefully located outside of the University's normal Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform – are accessible to all, and as such also provide a rich source of extension materials for collaborative partners and trainees.

Intended outcome(s)

The e-learning developments showcased in this Case Study have been developed to support the distance learning of trainee teachers in London, United Kingdom. The trainee teachers in

question possess multiple identities - occupying a space as both teachers/trainers and trainees/learners. They are also vocational learners - being trained to teach/train while completing voluntary local work placements. University teacher educators (such as myself) working with these vocational learners also occupy multiple positions - the teachers of teachers; the trainers of trainers: Both *teachers* and *teacher educators*. This dual-hermeneutical location further compounds and locates the pedagogy adopted to train the trainers. The teacher educator role is seen as a 'modelling' of practice and within this emphasis is placed upon dissemination of craft-tools which can be applied to the trainees' specific placements and practices. As trainee teachers spend most of their time in the workplace, they are both *workplace* and *work based* vocational learners, and situated as '*distance learners*'. This situated learning within the workplace, at a distance from the normal routines and workings of the University, has made e-learning and M-learning tools all the more useful to aid learner engagement and to support their training programmes and reflective practices.

The outcome of the time invested in podcasts, wikis, blogs and micro-blogging is to better equip trainee teachers with support mechanisms which can be accessed 'at a distance' from the learning in the formal sessions at the University; at the same time, the adoption of these tools models to trainees examples of e-learning and M-learning practices that they might wish to replicate for their own learners.

The challenge

The genesis for this research-informed practice emerges from my own hermeneutical situation - my current (at the time 'new' and 'emerging') role as a teacher educator. As with my trainees, my own professional identity as a teacher educator was as 'emerging' as their own identities as teachers in the lifelong learning sector. While 'figuring out' my own pedagogy as a (new) teacher educator, I wanted to develop blended and asynchronous tools that would support the distance and workplace learning of the trainees on the programmes I taught.

To support the emerging identities and practices of Vocational Education and Training (VET) professionals-in-training I have adopted a wide range of e-learning provision in my teaching and training, alongside a formal research project which uses wikis and blogs with a cohort of ex-trainees for impact measurement. This blended learning works to support trainees while on-programme through adopting a rich variety of e-learning tools:

- video blogs for mentors,
- social networking platforms (using the emergent technology of 'elgg'),
- podcasts - housed on a blog,
- wikis for pre-programme support and guidance and induction,
- and Twitter feeds for reading and research support for assignments.

These tools were constructed through collaboration with the University's school of distance and e-learning ('UELConnect'). They are designed to structure trainee support before and after sessions, rather than 'lecture capture' during sessions. The podcasting blog allows for continuation of (asynchronous) support from classroom settings - drawing out themes/issues for clarity and extension. Some trainees (only) use the podcasts for Mobile-learning opportunities, allowing for a reorientation of the places and spaces of their distance learning. The Twitter feed provides learners with regular updates for reading and access to online academic sources. The social networking site adopts the technology of the emergent 'elgg' platform to create a reflective space for the mentors of trainees. This space houses video blogging resources designed to support mentors' workplace Continuing Professional Development (CPD) - a project still in mid-stages of development.

Established practice

There has been considerable use of the podcasting blog and Twitter feeds, resulting in favourable feedback from external quality audits and inspections, and from the learners themselves. It is observed that through the Twitter feed learners are reading more widely and bringing new knowledge to sessions. The significant challenge in developing and using these e-learning tools with new entrants to the teaching profession has been the resultant pedagogic 'mismatch' many of the cohort have experienced with the teaching and learning strategies dominant within local placement providers.

"It's like a different world. What they tell me and inspire me [on the training] with and then what everyone else is doing." (Trainee reflection)

Evidence from trainees' reflective accounts of their work based learning suggests that all too often e-learning tools are seen as marginal, of little value, or even as 'distractions' from the 'serious business' of classroom teaching. This mismatch between the 'new' e-learning and 'old' face-to-face learning raises questions and observations regarding the legitimate peripheral participation of (new) trainee teachers as they enter workplace settings.

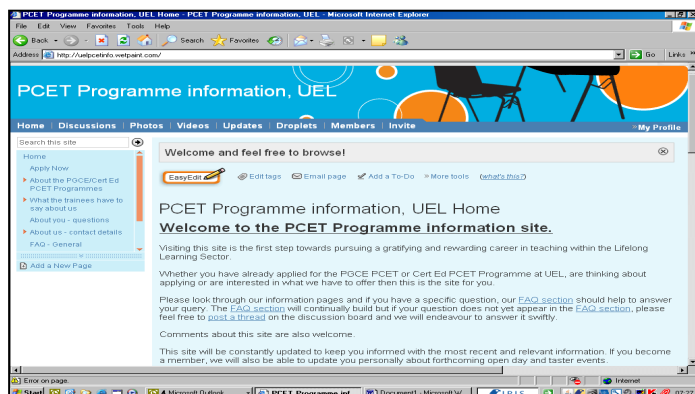
"I mean, they [established practitioners] say 'what's the point' and 'I can't use it'. My mentor said it was a waste of time and not serious teaching." (Trainee reflection)

The podcasts have required considerable investment of staff time to develop 'enough' of a product to warrant trainees exploring and using the resource and the recordings. The podcasts are recorded on an USB digital voice recorder and uploaded to a weblog housed by the University, accessible to all - located at: <http://blog.uelconnect.org.uk/warren/>.

Originally the podcasts were located within the programme's pages on the VLE but in doing so collaborative partners (who run teacher education qualifications validated by our institution) and collaborative trainees were unable to have access. The decision was made to house these resources 'outside' of the VLE – allowing public access. This is seen as both a statement of pedagogic intent - demonstrating and showcasing the e-pedagogy involved to a potentially 'outside audience' while at the same time providing an easily accessible tool for distance learners - one which was immediate. It also creates a tool which can then also be shared by mentors and other colleagues (such as staff in partnership provision attending CPD courses etc.).

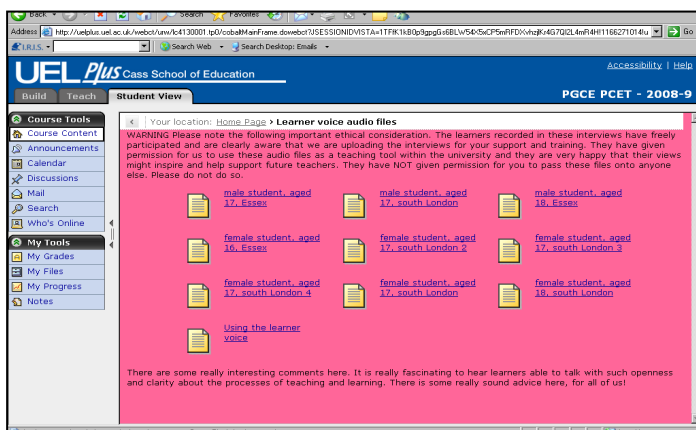
To summarise the varied provision below: the e-learning provision currently in use as part of 'normal practice' and 'normal routine' is comprised of a number of bespoke elements, each performing a different function:

- **Pre-programme wiki** – designed to support learners after acceptance of offer but before arrival and enrolment. I use this tool to engage learners right from the initial point of contact, after their interview, and it is used to build a community and group-feel before the trainees themselves actually meet each other on the programme.



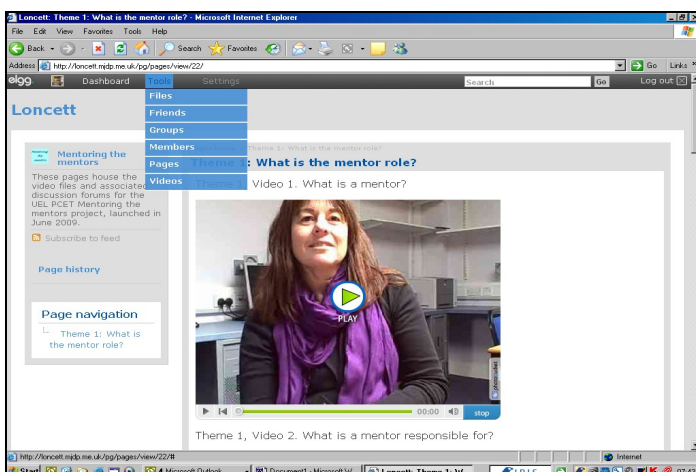
Screenshot of the 'pre-programme wiki' used over the summer prior to trainees' enrolment

- **Learner voice podcasts** – these are housed within the VLE and are used to provide interesting and imaginative resources to engage trainees in teaching sessions at the start of the induction programme. A series of interviews were conducted with local learners aged 16 -19 looking at issues of teaching and learning from the learners' viewpoint. These interviews were coded and segments of the digital recordings 'chunked' into audio files collated according to theme. This has generated a rich resource bank to be used with trainee teachers on the pre-service programme as part of induction sessions – to draw out key points of pedagogy and teaching and learning before attendance at placement begins.



Screenshot of the 'learner voice podcasting audio resource

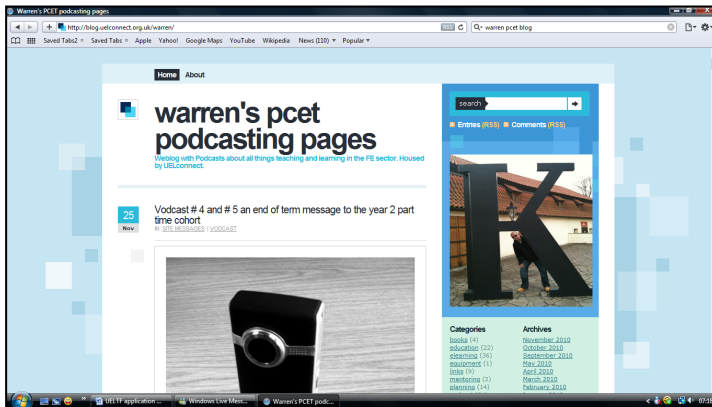
- **Mentoring video social networking platform** – a new project still in early stages. This work seeks to provide opportunities for the mentors we work with to engage in an online community as a means to further extend their own professional learning and CPD opportunities. This resource was funded by a 5K action research grant awarded by LSIS monies and has been the subject of dissemination at a number of events. We have used the 'elgg' platform to build a social networking site for mentors and other staff across the collaborative provision and also in local partner colleges. This site makes extensive use of video shot purposefully for this project in these local institutions where new and experienced staff reflect upon the nature and challenges of the mentoring role.



Screenshot of the mentoring video social networking platform

- **Podcasting blog** – this is where I house all my podcast (audio) recordings that I make for my trainees both before and after sessions. This resource enables learner engagement and support at times asynchronous to the regular pattern of timetabled sessions and allows differentiation by providing extra support and extending sessions further. Trainees regularly

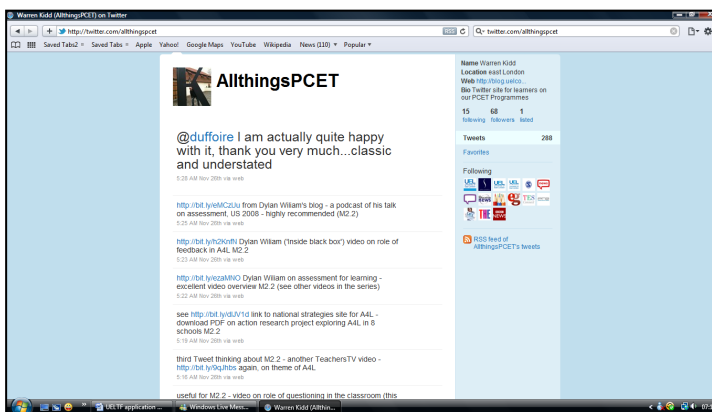
request ideas and themes for podcasts and through my blog I can disseminate these to all trainees in the whole of our collaborative partnership provision – not just those enrolled onto my modules. There has been a high take-up of these resources. I often hear spoken back to me in taught sessions ideas, content, sources and phrases that I know are a direct result of learners using the podcasting tools. An outcome of this project is a second application of podcasting tools – where myself and colleagues from across three different Schools within the University seek to deploy podcast recordings as a means to provide feedback on assignments with the view to further engage learners.



Screenshot of the podcasting blog

- **Twitter feed** – this micro-blogging resource is used primarily to extend learners' reading. I regularly 'Tweet' articles, sites and video content, streaming this into my blog so that my learners can have the opportunity to extend the sources and resources they use to learn. This has already had a massive impact upon the quality of classroom discussion (aided by increased further reading) and also many recent assignments. The use of the Twitter service for reading updates has had the greatest impact and uptake for the simplest and shortest amount of staff time.

The Twitter feed can be viewed at <http://twitter.com/allthingspcet>.



Screenshot of the Twitter feed

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

There are a variety of benefits of the utilization of these tools:

1. Learners can receive asynchronous support separate from formal sessions;
2. Learners have the opportunity to request resources (such as podcasts);
3. The part-time learners receive enhanced 'learning contact' outside of normal routines and evening sessions – there is here a slight reconceptualisation of what 'contact time' and 'teaching time' might mean;

4. The tools are 'fit-for-purpose' – they are chosen to do specific jobs which the VLE itself is unable to provide;
5. These tools allow for a modelling of blended learning practices (within a teacher education pedagogy) and at the same time a 'route-in' to discussions with trainees around 'digital learning'.

Key points for effective practice

Challenges and barriers

1. The majority of learners still access the resources 'located' at a desk-top and have not explored Mobile working/learning. The location of the desk-top PC itself might change - home, university, placement - but consumption is still tied-down in this way. The experiences of a minority of more mobile learners using these resources on various handheld devices further compounds the growing divide between those professional learners who have access to such technologies and those who either do not have access or who have little inclination.
2. Some trainees need much more support to access these tools (and to even see their potential 'benefit' prior to first access) than might be assumed - this leads to a great deal of staff time involved in the orchestration of support for learners to access and use the resources.
3. Making audio and video recordings has raised issues regarding work spaces - the need for the freeing up of rooms and times on campus to make recordings in a secure and private location.

Pedagogy

A great deal of time and reflection has gone into developing a simple structure for the recordings.

Guidelines for developing a podcast include:

1. Recording short files worked best (between 3 and 8 minutes), making it easier to retain learners'/listeners' attention.
2. It was vital to announce the programme/context at the very start of each podcast.
3. I used three or four key words at the start of each podcast which were then picked up and used/developed through the recording in order to 'locate' the content for the listener.
4. Frequently, I used the technique of counting and summarising points as a means to locate the audience within the audio.
5. There was an emphasis given at all times to use of specialist language, and also to the definition of this language and its deconstruction all through the recordings.
6. Each podcast recording re-capped the content at the end using the same key words that it started with.

The podcasts cover issues of substantive learning connected to the key sessions and modules of the taught programme. Having said this, they also provide the space and opportunity to draw parallels between subject content and to return to issues misunderstood to provide further clarity outside from and following-on from taught sessions.

It has been essential that the pedagogic need for these tools has existed before the adoption of the tools themselves. It is also the case that to even achieve a marginal take-up and impact of these tools on trainees' learning, there has been the need for massive orchestration and set-up by teaching staff. This has been seen as justifiable given the perceived importance of these tools for trainees' own future pedagogic practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the need for massive orchestration the use of a variety of e-learning tools has enabled this practitioner and his learners to engage with '21st century teaching' in a concrete and timely way. Placing the characteristics and needs of the learners and the pedagogic need as prime concern means that tools developed are appropriate and thus staff time and resources are 'well spent', despite difficulties of initial take-up. On reflection, it is interesting that the tool which has needed the least amount of staff effort and time – the Twitter feed – has resulted in the largest take-up and potential impact. As the tweets were so closely linked to extended readings and were timed to coincide with assignment work there was an instrumental motivation for their use which placed the use and impact of this tool above all others. By contrast, the podcasts – while used by many – are still seen as an 'extra' and for some learners the effort needed to come to grips with these tools is more than the perceived learning benefits of something which is not required. This demonstrates that blended learning and e-pedagogy needs a genuine learning need to 'take off'.

In all, the take-up of the tools by the part-time cohort is significant and these distance learners are now better supported than before. Interestingly, many of this cohort are now planning and delivering Web2.0 teaching tools themselves, demonstrating once again the importance of such modelling within a teacher education pedagogy.