

WELCOME TO OUR VIRTUAL WORLD!

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THERE ARE MANY WAYS TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE WORK AND COMMUNICATE, FROM THE ONES WE MORE OR LESS TAKE FOR GRANTED SUCH AS EMAIL AND TEXT MESSAGING, TO CUTTING EDGE TECHNIQUES THAT CAN CREATE 'VIRTUAL' TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.



Steve Ingle

Here's a simple example that proved its worth during the worst of the winter weather. The Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) Department has been exploring the use of SMS text messaging as a way to improve communication channels with trainees on the full and part-time programmes. As well as reminders about submission deadlines and other important information, we used it very effectively to tell people about closures due to snow!

Because the vast majority of trainees own a mobile phone, SMS text messaging was identified as a way to effectively communicate essential or urgent messages and reminders directly. A number of text message services have been explored and *Janet txt* selected as a cost-effective solution and as the only 'approved' UKERNA provider for the Joint Academic Network (www.pageonejanettxt.com).

Now instant SMS text messages can be sent from a simple web interface to one or many trainees, including class groups and the whole cohort.

The Faculty uses online distance learning on a number of programmes, and a range of online and Web 2.0 tools are used to support and enhance the learner experience. For example, the use of the Pebble Pad (www.pebblepad.co.uk) ePortfolio platform is supporting evidence collection and reflection against the professional standards for trainee teachers. The use of 'Google Docs' is creating online registers to track and monitor the attendance of trainees. We are also busy blogging, 'Tweeting' and communicating with social networking sites such as Facebook to connect with all our trainees. The PCET Blog (<http://ehpcet.blogspot.com>) gets around 200 hits a month from trainees but also from other followers all over the world.

Most excitingly, we are trialling a virtual classroom environment for both staff and learners, and this is particularly good news for distance learners on Faculty programmes such as the Masters in Education. It allows people to share information and talk to each other remotely.

From a staff perspective, we have trialled it with a module briefings and online standardisation events. Rather than bring every tutor to the same geographic place for the briefing, we connected them all online in a virtual meeting room. Everything from a session can be recorded, which is good news for anyone who misses it, and we will be rolling out a more comprehensive version during the year.

My colleagues in Primary Education have been using www.edmodo.com with undergraduate trainees to facilitate private micro-blogging with pupils.

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In Professional Development the 'Ning' (www.ning.com) social networking site is being used for anonymous communication as part of a research project, and videos are being used as online tutor introductions for students. Screencasts now supplement traditional lectures and another project is looking at the use of the Apple iPad in education.

Trialling and using new technologies calls for investment – both monetary and in terms of time – but the benefits are tangible.

Set against the background of constant change in education, the immediacy these new technologies can give is invaluable, especially when they can act as a filter device. Where we used to say "the information you want is on the web, go find it", our use of blogging, social media and texting means that what we produce is more personalised and relevant. In a world with far too much information, this adds a bit of control!

Preparing trainees to feel confident in the use of learning technologies is becoming an even more essential role of the Faculty. Trainees entering their careers need to use a variety of tools to engage, enthuse and connect with their learners. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) provides many exciting opportunities for teachers to do just that.

Although new technology demands initial investment, payback can also be considerable. Virtual meeting rooms cut the need for travel, saving both time and money. Technologies such as Blackboard, Pebble Pad and Wimba now make distance learning easier and open up opportunities for learners based far from one of our centres.

No method is perfect of course: a simple text alert will fail if the recipient doesn't check their phone or changes their number without telling us; virtual classrooms and screencasts can only involve users with compatible technology. Using technology for technology's sake can also backfire and lead to distractions and diversions. The key is to harness the benefits where technology has the potential to enhance the teaching and learning experience – putting the pedagogy first.

Perhaps the biggest problem however is simply keeping up! Sometimes you get the feeling that the system you just chose has been overtaken by something else, but that's a issue faced by all sectors and in many ways it's a nice challenge to have.

Used as a dynamic and evolving suite of tools, these technologies are radically changing and enhancing the way we learn, evaluate and share across not just the Education Faculty, but with the entire University and the wider world.

WHAT IS SOLSTICE?

The SOLSTICE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (SOLSTICE) impacts upon all three Faculties at Edge Hill University, enhancing students' learning opportunities. It aims to develop innovative methods of programme delivery, evolving as new technologies and multimedia applications become available. It covers a wide range of programmes across Foundation Degrees, CPD opportunities and MA programmes.

A key to its success is the ethos of sharing skills and knowledge with staff across the University in curriculum design, preparation of online material and online tutoring and support. That sharing of expertise expands to the wider higher education sector, both in the UK and internationally, building on an existing track record of partnership.

The SOLSTICE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Edge Hill University is holding its 6th international e-Learning conference on 8 June 2011. Contact solstice@edgehill.ac.uk for more information.

AND OUR SURVEY SAID...

ONLINE SURVEYS HAVE BECOME A QUICK AND EASY WAY OF COLLECTING AND ANALYSING LARGE AMOUNTS OF DATA IN RECENT YEARS.



Edge Hill's Primary History specialist and module leader Chris Russell has used a free system from Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) to support his half term evaluations.

It has proved to be a useful tool, but persuading students to get involved has highlighted some of the challenges of using new and innovative methods.

Chris explained: "I really think we have to try new things and I was keen to see what feedback I would get to an online survey and evaluation system such as this. From my point of view, it is a good way of correlating information and calls for a relatively small investment in time by the trainees, as there were only about seven questions for them to answer.

"We used Blackboard to tell everyone it was available, but so far the response has been limited. I think this is a good example of how people have personal preferences when it comes to electronic communication methods. Some people liked this, others just didn't, and it will take time to establish.

"I have found the same to be true of Twitter. I originally thought Twitter would be an ideal way to get urgent messages out to people on the programme but again, building up a following has taken time.

"Some people have said they would prefer a system that uses Facebook instead; even first year students who I thought would be keen to embrace all social networking opportunities. Others say they don't want anything on Facebook, because they don't use it any more. It just goes to show that personal preference – and probably familiarity – is important.

"The key for us is to explore, experiment and provide a whole suite of options when it comes to technology and learning. I am certainly going to use Survey Monkey again next year and will also carry on with Twitter, because I find it convenient to be able to communicate from my mobile phone.

"The key for us is to experiment and provide a whole suite of options when it comes to technology and learning."

"We cannot ignore the progress being made in terms of electronic communication and data collection and sharing, but we have to accept that for every one person who loves Tweeting, there will be another who won't use it, or who perhaps does not have the right hand-held device to be able to access it on the move."

KNITTING CIRCLE FOR THE TECHNO-CURIOUS? SOUNDS INTERESTING...

PLANS ARE WELL ADVANCED FOR THE LAUNCH OF A NEW TECHNOLOGY USER GROUP – PROVISIONALLY NAMED TEC (TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION COLLECTIVE) – WHICH AIMS TO INSPIRE CREATIVITY AND FOSTER EXCITEMENT TO USE TECHNOLOGIES IN EDUCATION INTELLIGENTLY.

TEC is the brainchild of Megan Juss, Learning Technology Development Officer at the Edge Hill University SOLSTICE Centre and her colleague Hannah Crumbleholme, who are hoping to establish a monthly user group.

Megan said: "Think knitting circle for the techno-curious! Really it is for anyone with an interest in technology and education. It will be an active community of practice where members can collectively explore the potential and limitations of technologies in the context of education.

"Developing and enhancing practice as a learner or educator in isolation is difficult and can lead to feelings of frustration; it is also often much less effective. So we want people to talk, exchange ideas, ask questions, get (and give) answers, share stories, tips and resources, discuss research interests and paper ideas and, most importantly, get creative!"

"An active community of practice"

The main aim of the meetings will be to encourage and enable communication between disparate groups across Edge Hill University (and beyond, where relevant). It should give lone developers the chance to connect with the larger development community and become a forum through which the user community can communicate its needs to the University.

Hannah said: "The meetings will offer members an informal and supportive environment.

"Sometimes there will be a specific theme or a member presentation, at other times the meeting will be more organic, offering opportunities to experiment with new technology devices or software. At all times the intention will be to inspire creativity and foster excitement to use technologies in education intelligently."

"Opportunities to experiment with new technology"

What sort of questions could the TEC ask – and answer?

- What do we do as learners?
- What do we do as educators?
- What technologies are we using?
- What technologies could we use?
- Why?

Everyone with an interest in using technology is welcome to join the TEC – academic and support staff, students, partner schools/college staff, external HEI colleagues. The more diverse perspectives, the better.

Contact:

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Edge Hill University hosted an open event in Coventry in February and gave delegates the chance to try out Promethean systems, to see how they can impact on teaching and learning.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Faculty of Education has been investigating the use of tablet computers as mobile education tools, and recently turned its attention to the iPad.

A project has been running for several weeks, looking at the potential of the iPad from both student and tutor viewpoints. Run alongside our Masters programmes, the project is looking at how (and if) the iPad can help participants access information, work more collaboratively and build better e-portfolios. Other benefits such as time saving and ease of access will also be looked at. The study is only part way through, but will report back mid-year.



CLIMBING THE MASTERS MOUNTAIN

DOING A MASTERS DEGREE ONLINE CAN FEEL LONELY AT TIMES, WITH ONLY TEXT TO KEEP YOU COMPANY. MODULE LEADER SAM FOX AND LEARNING TECHNOLOGIST HANNAH CRUMBLEHOLME HAVE GIVEN THE INDEPENDENT STUDY MODULE, IN WHICH STUDENTS HAVE UP TO A YEAR TO CARRY OUT A PIECE OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH, A FACE LIFT. BUT IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT AESTHETICS AND USING IMAGES, AS THEY EXPLAIN.



Designed around the metaphor of climbing a mountain the online module, while still using Blackboard, has been redesigned around the notion of a learning journey. Signposts direct the students in a way that provides support but at the same time emphasises the student's ownership. The module emphasises the fact that, much like on a group climb, peer to peer support and mutual co-operation is crucial to reaching the summit.

Hannah says: "It's been amazing to see how many people who weren't that keen on online learning are enjoying the experience. It's about using a wide range of multi-sensory resources and making the learning easier to access."

Sam says: "In the past we've tended to rely on text and task. At Masters level the challenge has been creating a learning environment that is active, creative and personal. We have had some lovely comments about its usefulness and the fact that it sparks debate. One person said it had led to an interesting conversation about education with her teenage son, which was an achievement in itself!

"We have to find more creative ways of using what is, after all, a 2D vehicle. Teachers will listen to a podcast in the bath but are reluctant to download a paper."

Hannah's own Masters research focuses on what it takes to develop such a learning community; her background as learning technologist combined with teaching experience gives her insight into the importance of considering student engagement. Both Sam and Hannah want to see students acting as 'critical friends' supporting each other.

Hannah says: "I want teachers to see this the same way as I might see Facebook – to get home after a busy day and the first thing they do is log on. It's good to be part of a community of people faced with the same demands and challenges. Everyone needs to touch base occasionally and this is proving to be a great way of doing just that."

TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM – WHAT THE TEACHERS SAY

Simon Varley is Deputy Head Teacher at Alder Grange Community and Technology School in Rawtenstall. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the 'technology enabled' classroom.

He said: "We use Promethean resources throughout the school. All our rooms have interactive white boards and there is extensive use of hand held voting pod technology. This is very effective in terms of instant feedback on student progress."

Technology can be used effectively with the youngest learners too, as St Matthew's Primary School in Telford demonstrates. There is a considerable emphasis put on computer skills and the use of hand-held devices such as Wii. Not only is it great fun, it is also an integral part of the curriculum.

Head teacher Glenn Calcutt said: "We see this as part of the challenge of change. Even our nursery children are included and encouraged to use IT as part of their learning."



Some of the youngest pupils at St Matthew's Primary School get to grips with new technology – and enjoy every minute!

ACTIVEXPRESSION HELPS TRAINEES AND SCHOOLS

An innovative Formative Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Programme for final year Primary Trainee Teachers at Edge Hill University has been launched in partnership with learning technology specialist Promethean.

Twenty trainees have been given a full class set of hand held learner response systems (ActivExpression) with the aim that these trainees will become experts in this field.

The Enhancement Programme includes training on how to use the technology in addition to an in depth consideration of how the technology supports 'formative teaching and assessment.'

Trainees can apply their enhanced skills in the classroom as part of their synoptic placement and as they move on from Edge Hill into employment they will keep the equipment for their first term.

After that, their school can choose whether or not to keep the equipment or pass it back to the Faculty. Trainees were invited to apply for a place on this new programme by saying how they thought ActivExpression could enhance their practice. Those selected began the 16 hour enhancement in February and have been using the devices in their synoptic placement. Feedback has been excellent from the trainees and their schools. Here are some comments from the trainees:

'The children love using the devices; I feel I have a much better insight into children's learning as a result'

'I have found that my Year 1 children have become really good at using the expressions much quicker than I anticipated. I have already printed off two spreadsheets of assessment information which I am using to inform my planning.'

'In previous placements I relied on pupils putting their hand up or using whiteboards to show me they understood. Now I know what every child knows and understands and I can pick up on misconceptions really effectively.'