Developing Cross-institutional Virtual Learning Environments for Trainee Teachers

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Some recommendations and points for guidance:

i. Take early steps to promote a strong feeling of *common purpose* (Brabaux 2006:139). Strongly promote the benefits of a specialist community of practice, a *knowledge generating community*, at the start of the new academic year, and the need for *equality of engagement and mutuality of engagement* (Carnell and Lodge 2004:34).

ii. Students will be anxious to create a positive online social identity and this should not be underestimated. Dougiamas, the developing founder of the Moodle VLE has recognised this, stating that where people are *contributing for others to see, the 'personal stakes' are a lot higher* (2006:3). It is therefore important to take steps to reduce the social and emotional anxiety associated with participation and contribution :

   ▪ Ensure the environment and tone of the VLE is as welcoming as possible (Salmon 2002), paying attention to the use of non-threatening and student-friendly language. For example, the use of the term 'e-buddy' rather than 'co-mentor'.

   ▪ Consider an induction period for students to practise online communication and contribution to forums and wikis through simple tasks and responses (Gulati 2004). Salmon (2002) suggests it is important to *start together and move on together*.

   ▪ Set up online activities designed to encourage trust and connection. Salmon (2002) makes useful suggestions in this area.

   ▪ Miller's suggestion (2002) to produce a 'netiquette' guide may help to promote effective, but also friendly, communication.

   ▪ If possible, arrange early 'webcam' or videoconferencing to put faces to names and reduce anxiety about 'unknown' online participants. This would visually reinforce the notion of a supportive community of practice, as *developing communities may be fragile without some face-to-face contact* (Walters-Swenson and Evans 2003:27).

iii. It may be helpful to coach trainees, for example in co-mentoring skills. Students may not succeed in *substantive, reflective exchanges online if they have not learned to carry on similar conversations elsewhere* (McKnight 2000). Tutors may need to model techniques

that enhance social interaction and dialogue, mindful that technology is unlikely to encourage and develop collaborative thinking if students have had no experience of collaboration 'offline' (Livingston et al 2004).

iv. Promote further interaction through the use of 'blogs', either using the blog facilities available on VLE software or through hyperlinks to external blog websites. Promote the use of blogs as a vehicle for reflective practice and also to promote the development of metacognition and construction of personal pedagogies (Loughran (2006:4). A structured task to create an initial online reflective blog could be set during course induction. Consider blogs written and contributed by teacher educators to share personal pedagogical reasoning and ongoing personal development. This suggestion is influenced by the view of Loughran (ibid) that if trainee teachers are to genuinely "see into teaching", then they require access to the thoughts and actions that shape such practice.

v. Promote the added value of developing ICT skills not only as students but also as developing teachers, through the use of, and contribution to, the VLE. Some student teachers do not realise this, and this aspect together with the value of this additional learning, needs to be explicitly stated. This would follow the advice of Loughran (2006:5) that such things may not be fully apprehended if not explicitly linked to their learning agenda. Raise awareness of the difference between digital immigrants and the digital natives or net generation (Prenski 2000, cited in Brabaux 2006), who are likely to be current trainees' future students.

vi. Monitor the activity of silent participants or 'lurkers' and develop strategies to build confidence and encourage contribution.

vii. Add photographs, games and quizzes in a 'social and playground' area, and investigate the potential for links to students' personal web sites and social networking sites (such as MySpace, Facebook). Photographs were found to contribute significantly to a sense of community. There is great potential to link to online photo sharing and image sharing sites such as Flickr.

viii. Encourage e-buddy relationships to develop naturally and encourage students to have more than one buddy. Grouping students into subject area clusters can be helpful (in art and design for example, this could be graphics, textiles, sculpture) but it is also beneficial to promote cross-over between specialisms.

ix. Students requested an 'Alumni' section to allow continued access to the VLE. For students who have completed their studies, this would allow continued resource and information sharing, and would also allow buddy and informal mentor relationships to form between current and former PGCE students.

x.   Model use of the VLE over a continued period of time to encourage access, provide technical support and minimise technical barriers. Review access and passwords as the research findings have revealed that some students do not continue to access a VLE as they have simply lost their password. With permission, it may be helpful for tutors to keep a list of logins / passwords to hand.

xi.   Take steps to make a VLE more visually appealing wherever possible and reduce the barrier of a text-based medium with *lots and lots of words.* Students may regard commercially produced VLEs, often characterised by very neat organisation of information and resources, as an uninspiring contrast to their personal use of internet sites. Links to online 3D visual tools such as Second Life could also be investigated.

xii.   Ways to integrate the VLE into the curriculum should be explored and this would follow the advice of Miller (2002) and Britain and Liber (1999). For example, one focus group suggested that module reflections could be posted onto the VLE together with sections of other assignments. Opportunities to integrate cross-institutional collaborative work into the curriculum should also be investigated.

xiii.   Some students may be reluctant to contribute course work or participate informally due to the perceived *permanence of contributions* and unease about *having their thoughts publicly exposed for all to see and criticise* (Williams 2002: 267). Limited viewing by only tutor and student could be offered for certain sections such as coursework posted online.

xiv.   Consider the issues connected to power and control, and consider aspects of the VLE which have the potential to be controlled and managed by the students themselves. Investigate student-only access to certain sections and forums to reduce association with tutor monitoring and surveillance (Foucault 1977, Gulati 2004 and Avis and Fisher 2006). This may promote a free exchange of ideas and opinions, as the formal language sometimes used by learners in tutor-monitored discussions can limit the exchange of ideas (Gulati 2006).

xv.   Investigate tools such as podcasting, mobile phones, PDAs and VOIP to explore the potential to merge formal and informal learning as advocated by Kop (2006), while being mindful that *efforts to focus on whiz-bang screen-based visual sites risk becoming outdated before they even get going* (Baldwin 2005:5).

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