

## Challenging academic performance to excel: the 'BE' project (performing Beyond Expectations)

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### Abstract

This paper attempts succinctly present and share our recent experience and reflections in planning and producing a digitally-rich Teacher Training (TT) Numeracy and Additional Learning needs recently validated course in a Higher Education Institution in the UK.

**Keywords:** Teacher Training, Online, Digital, Engagement, *Performance, Literacy, Technology*

As a Reader in Technology Enhanced Learning at a British University (The University of Bolton - UoB, UK) and a passionate about staff engagement and development, I am used to face challenges when planning, developing and delivering Technology-rich courses. However, when challenged by teacher trainees new innovative e-developments, I always feel I need to go back to the basics: eStaff engagement principles.

By 2014, many things could happen in the world: David Cameron could resign; Barack Obama could resign; England could win the football (soccer) world cup; or all our planets climate changes problem could end!. Or, all these might not happen at all!. One thing **will**: Students technology demands to enhance their learning experience will **increase** and our staff need to be prepared for it!.

We all know by now that Learning no longer needs to be one size fits all. *'The challenge for our education system is to leverage technology to create relevant learning experiences that mirror students' daily lives and the reality of their futures'*. National Educational Technology Plan, USED 2010

Teaching is a challenging but rewarding profession. However, the energy, enthusiasm and talents are not always enough to fulfill student satisfaction rates. The new emerging technologies are challenging and reshaping the way we present, deliver and collaborate in our practice and the development of new digitally-rich tools are becoming more and more necessary to provide access to all, to perform to high standards and to develop personal career.

As mentioned in our [Website](#), our *'teacher training program embraces courses for the UK Learning and Skills Sector. These Sectors include Further Education Colleges, Adult Education, Community Education, Sixth Form Colleges, Universities and the National Health*

*Services'*. Career pathways could see learners teaching in one of a broad range of lifelong learning sector settings, ranging from traditional FE college settings, through to charities and offender learning with varied technology access and uses as well as levels of restriction in using resources (i.e. some colleges do not allow access to social media resources within their college servers). Consequently, teacher trainers have to adapt and innovate content, activities and delivery approaches to the market.

The website also adds that *'the University has a reputation as one of the leading universities in the country when it comes to support with academic staff operating an open door policy to support trainees'*.

The recent achievement of the programme (**Outstanding**) by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in the UK), demonstrates the TT programme commitment to deliver high quality standards in teaching and learning supported by a highly qualified, motivated and supported academic staff team as well as strong learning infrastructure.

Indeed, the UoB provides with a range of technologies and ICT infrastructure to support teaching and learning, however although all academics have access to these, very few of them are enthusiastic enough to integrate them within the curriculum efficiently and effectively, making visible a clear gap between students technology expectations and academic staff digital engagement.

Following our success of the online ESOL/Literacy programmes as well as the Teaching and Learning for Professional Practice (T&L PP) which addresses health practitioners (which started in 2011), the UoB Education Subject group has aimed to make available integrated SfL **Numeracy and Additional Needs** Initial Teacher Training provision for trainees who find traditional provision difficult to access. The plan has been to develop, with some project partners, a blended learning approach for the Numeracy and the Special Needs routes, delivered flexibly, involving online study supported by locally delivered face-to-face sessions. **This is a fully technology-rich blended learning approach.** Numeracy and

Special Needs provisions, for both TT and CPD, are increasingly difficult to access due to the small number of providers regionally.

However, what any institution can do to ensure their staff are digitally prepared to face new challenges to fulfill the growing learners expectations?.

After 2 years of intense Teacher Training developments, and in between two Ofsted visits, four key areas have been identified as crucial to guarantee highly performance staff :

- Engaged and motivated staff
- Empower staff to develop new ideas
- Good ICT infrastructure and support
- Promote and keep academic collaboration to support best practice and enhancements

After these testing two years, staff have almost achieved self-management in planning, developing, implementing and reviewing interactive courses (in ESOL/Literacy and T&L PP), enhancing their staff development needs by sharing practices and collaborating with partner colleges and across university colleagues with outstanding achievement in delivering digitally-rich academic resources. The fact that these academics are top performers in their various teaching backgrounds, ensured that all resources and activities were pedagogic-rich as well as accessible and inclusive, resulting in simply but creatively presented blended learning resources. So, what are we looking at in our newly validated TT programmes?: we have learned and developed loads of good practices with the ESOL/Literacy and T&L PP. In addition one thing we consider important to look at, as fundamental for any improvements in the way teachers relate to technology, it is not just changes and enhancements in the classroom with supporting tools for teaching learners, but also to consider technology as a tool within their everyday working practice as well as their professional lives.

Another key plan we want to progress on, is to ensure that our paper-free 'sub-goal' courses to be a reality in most new TT courses to set out to run courses with minimum (and in some cases, absolutely no) paper. That means minimum or no photocopied handouts and no paper based note taking from trainees, etc. The challenge is to push teachers-to-be to the point where they will work totally in the digital medium and where paper became totally unnecessary. This has clear accessibility and inclusivity

implications, but hey!, we are after all *teachers* and we have a duty to continue our professional development and to innovate in all areas of teaching and learning.

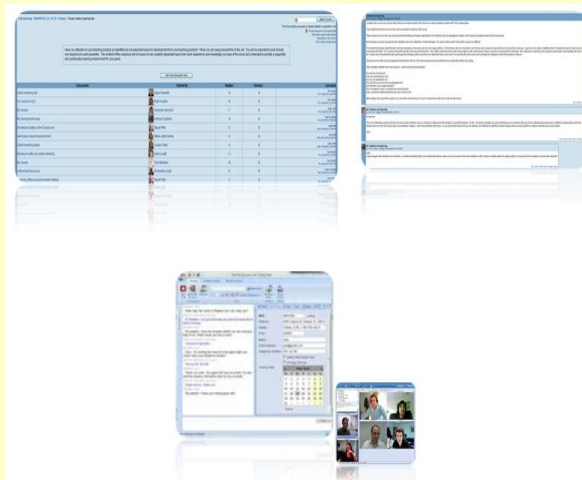
Another consideration in our carefully planned TT programme mentioned above, is to use a form of loop input (using the technology to teach the technology) so that teachers were learning about the technologies they could use with students by actually using them for themselves, breaking barriers of access and resource 'ownership' issues. A teacher that feels confident using a Virtual Learning Environment digitally-rich multimedia video, for example, will be more likely to use it innovatively in their session, that one that is only a 'user' (someone else, i.e. another colleague, upload resources and ready-made activities for the module teacher to deliver it with little or 'no' involvement with the interactive content). For this purpose, discussions are currently being carried out to agree 'development time' for academics (a *one-off* time, as e-resources should be developed to be 'reusable' and shareable across the subject group) to allow creative development of resources, activities and delivery approaches for all TT modules.

The following examples (Examples 1) show simple, inclusive and accessible approaches to deliver a technology-rich session on 'Applying Knowledge of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT for Learning and Teaching'. The module includes a variety of interactive parts, which include podcasts, video-casts, interactive reading, self-assessment and quizzes, as well as learners-led online reflective and collaborative discussions (asynchronous and synchronous). All these produced by the module tutor with adequate UoB ICT staff support.

### Examples 1

The screenshot shows a Moodle course page for 'TLAN - Applying Knowledge of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT for Learning and Teaching'. At the top, there is a banner for 'TTLTS Skills for Life' from the Faculty of Wellbeing and Social Sciences at the University of Bolton. Below the banner, there are several icons representing different course components: 'Introduction to Moodle', 'Course Announcements', and 'Academic Module Guide'. The main content area is titled 'Description and Purpose of Module' and contains text explaining the module's focus on personal, social, and cultural factors influencing ICT, literacy, and language learning and development. It also mentions that activities and assessments will take place online via the Moodle course. At the bottom, there are two icons: a group icon and an individual icon, with a legend indicating that the group icon indicates a group activity and the individual icon indicates an individual activity.

The learners-led online reflective and collaborative discussions are supported by the VLE (Moodle discussion and simple chat forums – asynchronous), as well as any other free cloud technology platform available to students (Skype, Live Chat software, MSN as Synchronous). Examples 2 below.



There has been an increasing pressure on all academic institutions, at F and HE levels in the UK, to respond quickly and efficiently to changes produced by the increasing globalisation of education markets, and the capacities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to transform the ways education is delivered and making it more flexible, inclusive and accessible. This has presented serious challenges for many academics whose own formative educational experiences and professional orientations were shaped under different circumstances, especially in Teacher Training programmes. Teaching is experiencing its biggest recruitment boom in years, with one in ten workers now considering a career in teaching at the moment. This new emerging markets require a more flexible delivery keeping quality standards at its highest, as competitors are aggressively opening new opportunities

With all this in mind, it is important to develop new partnerships and stronger collaborations, keeping academic staff motivated, engaged and in constant development, to ensure they perform 'beyond expectations', keeping their programme highly competitive in the market and in constant progression, and the TT academic and support team are taking steps by developing innovative but accessible resources and delivery approaches to respond to a very demanding emerging learners market

If we want our students to succeed in a global environment, then we, as educators, must be engaged in 21st century content, context, tools, thinking skills, and assessment. Thanks to digitally-rich learning we are all a 21st century inclusive life-long learners!.

#### References

- [OFSTED](#) [online 07/29/2013]
- [University of Bolton, UK](#) [online 07/29/2013]
- [National Educational Technology Plan, USED 2010](#) [online 07/29/2013]