

Specialist On-line Communities in Initial Teacher Training

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Abstract:

This paper examines the design, use and evaluation of the 'Specialist On-line Community' (SOC), a development to enhance the delivery of subject specialist pedagogy in post-compulsory vocational teacher education programmes at Huddersfield University in the UK. Firstly the developments are placed in the context of the collaboration between Budapest Polytechnic and Huddersfield University. The UK curriculum model is then examined, and the place in the course of study of subject specialist knowledge and pedagogy is identified. The development of the on-line communities in terms of delivery of the subject specialist element of the curriculum is discussed, and the design features of the SOC are described. The paper concludes with suggestions for expansion of the scope of the SOC and its operation, with recommendations being made which include: changes to the curriculum structure; an assessment strategy which includes a compulsory online element; skills development in the use of computer-mediated communications to be addressed in the teacher training.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Many of the initial teacher training (ITT) courses in the UK are delivered separately to the courses providing specialist knowledge, and the issue of specialist pedagogy within ITT is a particularly thorny one.

At the University of Huddersfield the issue is addressed by provision of a summer school where ITT students have an opportunity to meet and work with others in their specialisms. The SOC is an electronic forum, accessible via the Web, which allows information sharing and interaction between students and tutors, as an enhancement to the summer school experience.

This paper looks in detail at the structure of the ITT curriculum and the place of subject specialist pedagogy within the courses offered. The following section details the design, implementation and evaluation of the SOC, at this early stage of its development, before the paper concludes with recommendations for future development.

1.2 Context

Budapest Polytechnic and Huddersfield University are partners in the Leonardo funded Velvitt project, which is examining the use of Virtual Learning Environments in initial teacher training. This is the third project in the area of vocational teacher education; the first was to develop and restructure the teacher training curriculum in the Hungarian institution, and the second focused on lifelong learning initiatives in the professional development of teacher educators.

The development of the SOC is relevant to the project work, in that the on-line collaboration between the two institutions planned in the Velvitt project may well, in part, be conducted by arranging for guest access to the SOC for Hungarian and other partners.

2 The Teacher Training Curriculum

2.1 The Modular Structure

In devising the curriculum structure, research was conducted by Cook and Williamson[1] into the role of the teacher/lecturer in post-compulsory educational institutions. The following role areas were identified: (the teacher as) a planner of learning; a designer of learning; a subject specialist; an assessor; a curriculum developer; a practitioner; an organisation member; an enterpriser; a facilitator; a professional.

From these role areas the the curriculum was developed to a modular design to provide units of learning under the UK-wide (and now Europe-wide) Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme.

More recently, standards published by the regulating body for the post – compulsory sector, the Further Education National Training Organisation[2], have influenced the curriculum, and major changes may result in the near future as the government Department for Education and Skills (DfES) produce an ‘agenda for reform’[3].

However, at the time of writing, the modules which comprise the Certificate in Education course are:

- Planning and Designing for Learning
- Teaching a Specialist Subject
- Advanced Studies in Curriculum Design and Assessment
- Developing Professional Practice
- Advanced Professional Practice
- Developing Personal Skills
- Advanced Studies in Professionalism in Education and Training

Of particular interest in this paper are the two modules:

- Teaching a Specialist Subject
- Developing Personal Skills

2.2 Delivery of the Curriculum

The consortium for PCET is a partnership of colleges of further, higher and adult education across the North of England, including, and based at, the University of Huddersfield.

The curriculum is delivered in two modes: as a full-time one-year course for pre-service students, and as a part-time two-year course for in-service students. The pre-service course is delivered by university tutors, except for the professional practice modules, which are delivered by consortium staff when students are on teaching practice placement in the consortium colleges. The in-service course is delivered by consortium staff in the consortium centres, except for the Teaching a Specialist Subject module.

2.3 The ‘Teaching a Specialist Subject’ Module

Pre-service students spend much of their course in a specialist group with a tutor who is an experienced tutor in their specialist field. They, therefore, study the module ‘Teaching a Specialist Subject’ within their specialist group.

However, the in-service students, taking their course in the consortium centres, find themselves in mixed specialist groups. They are required to attend a summer school where they join a specialist group made up of students from different consortium centres. It is to enhance the experience at summer school that the SOC was developed.

3 Specialist On-line Communities

3.1 Design and Implementation

The SOC is a web-based database which requires participants to log-on to the system and select from a number of services which can be personalised according to their specialist profile. Participants can post personal details which can be viewed by, and enable them to be contacted by, other Community members. This personal presence consists of their name, a photograph, e-mail address, the consortium college attended, teaching area and interests, summer school specialist group chosen, and summer school seminar title and overview.

The database design allows participants (both students and summer school tutors) to access information in a variety of formats: student information can be listed by specialist group (tutor), by consortium centre, or by any combination of both. The proprietary VLE used at the University, Blackboard, is accessible from within the SOC to facilitate discussions.

A concept underpinning the whole curriculum is that of the "reflective practitioner"[4], and one way of engaging in a meaningful way in the discussion area is to share reflections on learning experiences. Some of the better examples of use of the discussion facility within the SOC involved more structured exercises promoted by the tutor. For example one tutor posed the question: "What are the qualities of an effective subject specialist teacher?", asking that students reflect upon their own effective learning experiences in their subject. The tutor was able to compile a list of effective tutor qualities from student responses, and this was a useful item to supplement the students' portfolio evidence of their achievement of the module outcomes. Another tutor asked students: "Choose a particularly difficult concept in your subject area. How would you go about teaching it?" This promoted good discussion, with participants making suggestions for improvement on other students' responses to the question. Some tutors encouraged students to use the SOC for providing feedback on resource sharing activities, and this also provided a suitable focus for discussion.

It is apparent that the provision of a structured discussion, and the setting of goals for participation, leads to a less superficial interaction and more meaningful

engagement with the SOC than is the case if students use the facilities only for social interaction.

3.2 Monitoring and Evaluation

Usage of the SOC is monitored on an ongoing basis by counting the number of times a participant logs on to the system. The number of log-ins is available to view as a field of the database, and this provides tutors with useful information regarding activity of the students, and in particular a means of identifying at an early stage students who are inactive and have never logged on to the SOC.

Additionally participants are encouraged to fill in an online questionnaire asking their opinions of the SOC provision, including features they found advantageous and aspects of the provision which discourage fuller participation. There have been no paper-based questionnaires distributed in this first year of operation of the SOC and so there are no completed questionnaires from non-participants. However, tutors were able, at summer school, to establish reasons for non-participation by some students, and two main reasons for that non-participation came to the fore:

Firstly, a number of students felt challenged by the technology and didn't participate because of lack of confidence in entering the site, negotiating the log-in procedure correctly, participating in on-line discussion groups, etc.

Secondly, students felt bound by time constraints, prioritised other areas of work in preparation for the summer school, and therefore didn't participate in the SOC simply because it was not a compulsory part of achieving the module outcomes. Many researchers in the field of online learning (for example Salmon[5]) have observed the phenomenon of non-participation in computer mediated communications when evidence of that participation is not required as a formal component of the assessment.

4 Conclusions and Future Developments

The SOC in its first stages of development can be considered as an overall resounding success. A majority of students have taken at the opportunity to enter personal information and actively communicate with a group of fellow specialists, before meeting them face-to-face at summer school. Tutors have been able to get information on the student group and co-ordinate activities on the SOC, enabling them to better prepare for the delivery of the module.

There are some specific recommendations that can be made to address the two major issues preventing full participation by students in the SOC:

To improve the readiness of students to engage in online discussions and achieve confidence in interacting with the systems and technology, it may be possible to integrate the Developing Personal Skills module on the course with the Teaching a Specialist Subject module, to provide the skills which are lacking. The combined module would begin at induction onto the course, in the sessions provided on computer and systems orientation.

To combat the other major reason for non-participation, the combined module needs a compulsory on-line element in its assessment. The portfolio of evidence required to show achievement of the module outcomes would need to contain hard copy of the personal presence on the SOC, a print out of on-line discussions, and perhaps the completed questionnaire to evaluate the SOC (to indicate engagement with the factors affecting on-line learning).

There are a number of ways in which the operation of the SOC can be expanded:

The technical scope of the SOC can be increased by introducing features such as links to other web-based resources and specialists sites, synchronous chat facilities and incorporation of video-conferencing.

Participation in the SOC could be a compulsory element in mentorship training. In this way, teachers that were identified as experts in their specialist field, and who are fulfilling the a role of mentor to initial teacher trainees, could provide online support and contribute their expertise to online discussion.

Pre-service students and their specialist tutors could also be enrolled on to the SOC.

Finally, the Leonardo funded VELVITT project can provide the opportunity for guest access to the SOC by project participants (and their students as appropriate), giving the subject specialist on-line communities a European dimension.

References

- [1] **Cook and Williamson: Teacher role areas and modularisation of the curriculum, Unpublished report, School of Education, University of Huddersfield, 1993**

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- [5] Salmon, G: E-moderating – the key to teaching and learning on-line, Kogan Page, 2000