The Forum is a partnership of the Higher Education Institutions offering initial teacher training (ITT) programmes (further and higher) in the West Midlands area. They are the Universities of Wolverhampton, Warwick, Staffordshire, Worcester and Birmingham City.

The Forum has set up Professional Dialogue seminars as a series of events to share good practice across the West Midlands. Teacher Educators from each of the ITT teams within the partnership are invited to exchange ideas on topics of educational interest.

The second Professional Dialogue seminar was held at RAF Cosford on 11 December 2009 and covered two inter-related themes: ‘The current and potential use of mobile technologies to enhance learner engagement and the effectiveness of different technologies in a teaching context’ and ‘The integration of blended learning and new technologies into curriculum design and the pedagogical framework which underpins it’.

The seminar was well received with partner colleges and representatives from Jisc and Warwick, Wolverhampton, Birmingham City and Staffordshire universities attending. General comments were that delegates had an interesting and enjoyable day and appreciated the opportunity to get together with colleagues ‘Excellent opportunities for networking and collegiate discussion.’

This report is a collation of the ideas from the day and is by no means a complete picture of all the interesting and stimulating discussion which took place. It is written to share the key points across the Forum partnership.

The session started with a presentation and demonstration of mobile technologies by Allen Crawford-Thomas of RSC-WM. This was very interactive with delegates able to try out different tools and a discussion around their use in current and future practice – see email for a link to the presentation.

The current and potential use of mobile technologies to enhance learner engagement and the effectiveness of different technologies in a teaching context.

The morning discussion followed on from the JISC presentation with Teacher Educators sharing their current practice. All Teacher Educators were using and engaging with technology and some of the main tools and strategies currently being used are given below. The need for technologies the trainees use in life was recognised – ‘don’t stop them, work with it’. An advantage of this technology was the way it could be adapted to assist those with learning difficulties eg Voice Recognition technology and the ability to change the format to suit needs of visually impaired or dyslexic learners.
Mobile technologies and strategies for use

The use of video cameras to record presentations, examples of good practice, micro-teaching sessions and observations was the most widely used mobile technology. The advantages were that this enabled: learners to use the video to reflect on their performance; tutors to view practice remotely; student activities could be compared with expert practice – engineering students used headcams whilst working on cars and compared their performance with the expert video on their VLE. There were disadvantages such as the difficulty of positioning video cameras during observations and there was discussion around the difference between using video as a ‘snapshot’ of what was happening and creating a ‘film’. Nervous trainees might not perform as well if videoed and familiarisation in sessions prior to observations was suggested as a useful strategy.

Digital and Flip cameras and mobile phones were used to photograph posters, images of group work, flipcharts etc which were then uploaded onto college VLEs. Alternatively trainees took photographs of flipcharts on their own phones. The main advantage was that trainees were not required to make notes and could access the information at any time.

Notebooks, especially Netbooks, were used in sessions for online activities including: research; accessing course materials or subject areas; viewing PowerPoints; accessing hyperlinked documents; taking notes; notes from group discussions to be added to webfolio; blogs and forums for critical thinking and collaborative learning; Pre-prepared assessments; reading journals or e-books. These strategies both improved differentiation and saved on printing resources. One college has a notebook rental scheme for trainees. An advantage of the Netbook is that it has a reverse screen. Another quick and effective tool was the freestanding keyboard which can be passed round so each of the group can write comments. Webinars and SKYPE were also useful ways of communicating.

Specialist IT staff were also used in colleges with differing roles, for example E-learner advisors working with TE teams to improve practice; Technology Champions who are IT enthusiasts to motivate those less interested and ILT Learning Coaches who help in sessions – these were transient, non-teaching posts.

Texting trainees was a popular use of mobile phones. Txttools software was used by a number of colleges for communication with trainees on session observations, grades, tutorial arrangements, room changes etc. All colleges who used it felt it had improved retention and communications.

Blogging and forums were also widely used to improve critical thinking and collaborative learning. However the important aspects were the pedagogy and thought put into it. Podcasts were being developed to give ‘how to’ experiences which explain how functions work.

Impact and Issues

Colleges stated that most learners enjoyed using the technology and had integrated it into their own teaching although it had an adverse effect on a minority of learners. For Teacher Educators it was a mixed experience. It was felt that it made life easier at a systems and communications level and the ability to provide feedback at any point in the learning process had a high impact on learning and achievement but this also had an impact on time and availability for Teacher Educators.

Three main areas of concern were raised. The first was around the management of technology including: Trainee expectations that ITT tutors would answer queries and give feedback very quickly; a change in conceptual thinking from making the use of technology a different strategy to using it to enrich the
learning experience; the need to understand what the technology was being used for and to buy and use the right technology; issues around what ‘contact’ means in terms of contact hours and whether these have to be within a classroom setting or monitored groups on internet. This raised issues around fairness to trainees and TEs and across the TE team especially as those teaching within Prison education generally can’t use technology.

The second area was the need for TEs to be aware of Protocols, ethics and E-Safeguarding. Examples given were: Using social networking sites even on a closed group as there are privacy issues; information put on websites and issues around permissions, length of time, data protection etc; awareness of own need for protection – case study of tutor whose laptop was used by trainees to download inappropriate content when left logged on which came to disciplinary. This raised issue of how management investigate incidents.

Organisational issues: It was recognised that TEs needed to use mobile technologies and this would involve them upskilling and investment in equipment. The use of remote and mobile technology requires a change in the use and focus of college buildings and the concept of what constitutes contact time.

Action points from delegate feedback sheets: The following are the actions which delegates are taking back into their practice:

**Safeguarding:** Research into JISC’s ‘e-safeguarding’ and DIUS ‘e-learning’ policies and protocols

**Video:** Use of video to: put introductory statements from learners on group areas of VLE; for micro-teaching; recording visiting speakers and uploading to VLE; providing exemplars of learner presentations linked to a discussion forum; as part of blended learning project; use of webcam for distance learning

**Texting:** Use of texting to contact learners to improve communication, feedback and ‘housekeeping’

**Mini Projector:** Projector used in poor quality rooms to enhance delivery and engage learners.

**Notebooks:** Use a digital notepad for electronic note taking; feedback from group discussions; as a learning support tool; for lesson observation feedback. Also mentioned were the use of a freestanding keyboard to write group discussions on to the electronic whiteboard and VLE and the use of an EETOP PC with elderly or dyspraxic learners as it has a light and portable touchscreen and using the handwriting feature on Netbook to complete forms which then translate to text.

**Expert advisors:** Colleges were interested in the use of expert advisors to support in sessions and for the development of staff across teaching areas.

**Other:** Skype was being investigated for use in tutorials and one delegate was creating prodcasts. Other comments were to make time for students to practice new technologies; encourage sharing good practice; identifying ways to engage all trainees; use mobile technology in a pedagogical way; and the need to cater for all kinds of approaches to learning, not to feel intimidated by the tools but have fun and enjoy them.
The Integration of blended learning and new technologies into curriculum design and the pedagogical framework which underpins it.

Colleges were using a blended learning approach for different programmes including: Cert Ed; the second year of DTLLS and a PTLLS programme for new staff. The Warwick partnership supports the technology development of trainees in year 1 of the DTLLS programme to enable them to use the blended learning approach in year 2 of the programme. Some colleges are not using a blended learning approach and it was suggested that there should be a choice for learners between a blended and taught programme.

There was discussion about how technology has been used within programmes and the following are some of the strategies shared:

- Use of VLEs (Blackboard, Moodle and Ning) for tutorials, blogs, webfolios, discussion forums, online delivery of materials, feedback from trainees, uploaded presentations, evidence etc from digital camera, work and flipcharts from sessions so those absent can catch up easily, weblinks to extend knowledge and research.

- Dividing large groups into pods to form blogging groups and exchange ideas gave a high level of learner engagement, created more dialogue between learners and was good for networking skills.

- A Whole group discussion held on VLE and facilitated by a tutor, instead of a classroom session. To count for attendance trainees need to log into session.

- The visual impact of interesting slides and the importance of creativity were discussed. E-books for learners improved reading and essays but was expensive. Laptops were used for e-discussions.

- Passing ownership to learners to share their skills/knowledge of technology increases engagement and confidence.

A number of questions were raised by the discussion:

- What is the difference between distance and blended learning and the need for the purpose to be clearly defined? If e-learning is online only then is this just e-information and not learning. How do you move trainees through the stages defined by Race as surface, strategic and deep to encourage deep learning?

- What is the importance of face to face group interaction? For a number of students this is their main reason for undertaking a programme does online interaction have the same impact?

- Does texting affect language ability? Discussion around texting and whether it was simply a motor skill or whether it involved learning processes. Questions were also raised about whether it affected the learning of formal grammatical language structures.

- Policy makers need to create an environment where technology can exist and to recognise the skills and equipment needed for success and plan the curriculum and timetabling hours to include online, out-of-classroom time. Whether blended learning was seen as requiring fewer staff!

- The impact of using ReFlect on creativity and the support needed by trainees to use this software.
A number of advantages and disadvantages to blended learning were also identified. The advantages were seen as:

- Improved performance through faster feedback available for learners, the skilled use of tutor questioning via blogs develops analytical skills and deeper reflection resulting in improved theoretical work and the ability for tutors to keep closer monitoring of progress, issues etc.
- The flexibility of blended learning enables participation by those who are unable to attend classes due to teaching or family commitments.
- The use of forums widens the students’ interactions with other members of their group and with learners from other groups.
- Learners enjoy using the technology, it increases attendance and completion of assignments and trainees have included it in their own teaching.

Disadvantages were seen as:

- Tutors need high levels of skills to engage learners who are used to technology and this involves high quality training and support. There was also a tension between trying out new strategies and the need to cover content. Programme assessment needs to change to incorporate new ways of working including assessing evidence on VLEs both tutor to trainee and trainee to trainee.
- Trainees need to recognise the need to work independently and work in-between sessions. This involves regular tutor contact and support which has cost implications.
- As blended learning programmes are more flexible will this raise competition from colleges in other areas?

Action point from Delegate feedback sheets: The following are the actions that delegates are taking back into their practice:

Forums: Facilitating the use of a ‘live’ discussion forum with all learners logged on at a certain time in place of class contact.

E-Books: Use of e-books delivered on line for key, popular or expensive texts to make them available to all on demand.

Ning: Use of NING for IT students who have no access to VLE in the institution.

Pods: Use of pods to give increased level of engagement

Blended learning: Several colleges are investigating a blended learning approach to both year 2 DTLLS and PTLLS whilst others took advice from their peers that: Blended learning works best when added into a course with thought and care and with consideration given to structure; Learners need thorough initial assessment and induction of the IT skills needed for the programme and will require support with the technology involved; Need to develop own IT skills and seek support from organisation.

Resources to share:
Txttools for communication via PC http://www.txttools.co.uk/preloginjsp/txttools/index.jsp

‘Shift Happens’ YouTube clip at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdTOFkhaplo