



3: Nottingham Trent University Virtual Schools

Name and role

Robin Kearsley Bullen, Senior Lecturer and Virtual Schools Administrator

Contact details

robin.kearsleybullen@ntu.ac.uk

Institution name

Nottingham Trent University

Background

Nottingham Trent University School of Education is currently celebrating 50 years of initial teacher education. It offers a number of courses designed to facilitate entry into the teaching profession in both the primary and secondary phases. Secondary routes include The Postgraduate and Professional Certificates in Education (PGCE), the Graduate Teacher Programme and a number of undergraduate courses leading to QTS. The subjects catered for are Business Studies, Design and Technology, English, ICT, Mathematics, Music and Science.

The Virtual Schools initiative is a wiki for secondary PGCE trainees which runs as part of the Education Professional Studies (EPS) module. Trainees would use the wiki while in university, at home or in their placement schools.

Intended outcome(s)

The Virtual Schools initiative was designed to provide a vehicle for online collaboration, which will help trainees in addressing the following standards for qualified teacher status:

- Q8 Have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified.
- Q17 Know how to use skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT to support their teaching and wider professional activities.
- Q32 Work as a team member and identify opportunities for working with colleagues, sharing the development of effective practice with them.

The initiative would provide opportunities for trainees to work in a cross-curricular environment similar to that of a real school, as the Education and Professional Studies (EPS) groups, each of approximately 20 trainees, were organised to include representation from the different subject areas.

Established practice

The trainees were allocated to a Virtual School randomly (the schools had plausible-names such as "East Loughborough Specialist School"). There were a number of tasks to complete during Phase 1 of the course (the period from course induction up to the start of the first block school placement in November, a total of eight weeks).

These were:

- to sign up and “join the staff”;
- to work collaboratively on a school motto;
- to produce a front page for the school website, and;
- to undertake a writing task in groups of three or four, which would then be assessed by another similar group as part of an EPS session. This would feed into a session on critical reflection later in the course.

The challenge

The feedback from the 2009-10 cohort raised a number of issues. These included:

- Virtual school tasks were seen as irrelevant and overly time-consuming when the workload is already heavy.
- There was a need for the work to be assessed.
- Lack of engagement by some trainees.
- There was a tendency for ICT trainees to “take over”.
- The initiative was seen as a “bolt-on” rather than an integral part of the course.

There had also been a considerable overhead in setting up the wiki; the virtual schools were self-contained and configuring the user permissions took a considerable amount of administration time. This led to a further drawback, in that trainees could not see what their colleagues in other virtual schools were doing.

Modifications for academic year 2010-11

The EPS team had decided to undertake a major overhaul of the course structure for academic year 2010-11. The groups were to be cross-curricular in nature as opposed to subject-based, and the EPS seminars would, on the whole, be trainee-led rather than tutor-led. The obvious course of action for the Virtual Schools initiative was to identify each school with an EPS group; it was felt that this would give each EPS group an identity from the outset and help to reduce the perception that Virtual Schools was a “bolt-on”.

The associated tasks were reconsidered; the sign-up and motto were retained, but the web front page and writing exercise were replaced by the production of a school prospectus. It was hoped that this, as it consisted of producing a document rather than a webpage, would nip in the bud any likelihood of ICT trainees dominating. Producing the prospectus would encourage the trainees to look at many aspects of school life and consider how these should be presented to the outside world. The seminar topics would gradually introduce more of the considerations required to produce it, and the fact that the trainees were in schools for two days a week prior to beginning their block placements would provide them with more data for their prospectus.

The prospectuses were assessed by having the EPS tutors complete a proforma (see *additional information* for an example). EPS tutors were also asked to monitor usage by their group as a means of promoting engagement.

It was felt that the measures detailed above should help to address the concerns expressed in the previous year’s evaluation.

Modifications for academic year 2011-12

The PGCE EPS programme was merged with those for GTP and the BSc (Hons) Secondary Design and Technology Education as part of a rationalisation exercise within the School of Education. This meant that even more emphasis would be placed on the use of the wiki as a communication tool for organising the trainee-led seminars.

After consultation with the EPS team, it was decided to replace the prospectus task with a weekly series of short, focussed discussions linked to the seminar topics. It was felt that this would give trainees the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned from the seminars and engage further with the issues raised. Tutors would take part in the online discussions. Feedback on this is due to be collected towards the end of November 2011.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

Apart from allowing the trainees to engage with the technology, the Virtual School provided an environment in which trainees who were based at different campuses or in their training schools could share files and collaborate easily. This was essential when trainees from the Clifton and City sites were called upon to work together with GTP colleagues to plan and deliver a seminar.

Trainees were encouraged to use the wiki for this purpose in addition to contributing to the mandatory tasks. 54% of the cohort chose to work in this way.

The wiki had previously been “compartmentalised” so that trainees only had access to the pages from their own school; however, for 2010-11 it was made completely open, so that all pages were accessible to all trainees (it turned out that 51% of trainees had looked at pages from schools other than their own).

Trainees’ evaluations of the initiative in phase 1

One of the questions trainees were asked was to identify the overall negative aspects of the initiative. Many of the responses were very similar to those received the previous year; effectively, the same issues (listed in “The Challenge” above) had been highlighted, despite the implementation of the measures detailed above.

Trainees were also asked to rate their overall perception of the value of the initiative on a scale of 1 (of little benefit) to 5 (highly beneficial). The mean value actually dropped from 2.5 in 2009-10 to 2.1 this year. This was the principal driver in replacing the prospectus task by something more manageable, focussed and time-constrained.

A number of the trainees indicated that they would like to have had more training, or at least guidance, in using the wiki. To this end, a full-cohort introductory session was delivered in induction week, and a number of video tutorials demonstrating how to undertake common tasks were made available within the EPS virtual learning environment. In addition, a number of tutors expressed a desire to receive further training themselves, so a workshop session has been organised for them.

Tutors’ evaluations of the initiative in phase 1

The EPS tutors were invited to give us their feedback at a team meeting in November. Of the 13 tutors, only five returned the questionnaire. Whether this was due to pressure of work or apathy is yet to be determined. Tutors were asked to rate their overall perception of the value of the initiative on the same scale of 1 to 5 as the trainees. Those who responded returned a mean value of 3.4. Themes that emerged included:

- the perception of a lack of involvement on the part of some trainees;
- the need for tutors to stress the expectation that the wiki should be used as part of the seminar planning process;
- the need for more focussed training in using the wiki – still a new technology to many and
- a requirement that tasks be more formally assessed.

Key points for effective practice

- The use of a wiki can address a number of useful points for trainees in terms of their QTS standards.
- It allows trainees who find it difficult to meet to share files and collaborate easily.
- It is essential to have the tutors on board – there currently appear to be varying degrees of support and involvement from the tutors.

Conclusions and recommendations

My colleagues and I in the Virtual Schools team still feel that the initiative is a worthwhile exercise. The negative responses of many of the trainees obviously belie this to some extent, and it would appear on a preliminary analysis of the evaluation data that the accompanying tasks are still seen as an additional imposition on trainees' time without a great deal of tangible benefit.

I am currently convinced that this is due to a failure to define precisely the aims of the initiative in terms of measurable outcomes and consequently to align the accompanying tasks effectively. Clearly, further work on this is required, and a more comprehensive analysis of the evaluation data is yet to take place. It is also planned to follow up the next evaluation by interviewing selected trainees and tutors in greater depth.