A Differentiated Approach to Embedding Real E-Learning in Teaching Institutions.

“I'm going to give you a PowerPoint presentation on "e-learning".

“As someone studying to be a qualified teacher, I'd like you to write an essay on the benefits of e-learning”.

Did you groan inwardly at these statements? I did as I wrote them. This is why.

When I attended a conference on teacher training and e-learning recently, the delegates were a mixture of teacher trainers, trainee teachers and people like me who are e-learning practitioners. Around the theme of E-Learning, the aim of the conference was to find ways in which teacher training could more effectively prepare teachers, not just for the classroom of the future (because learning should no longer take place only within the classroom), but for teaching and learning in the future.

At the start of the conference, following a now well-trodden path, we were asked to introduce ourselves and then to briefly state what we hoped to gain from the day. Without exception the delegates, including the trainers present, said that they wanted to go away from the conference not” knowing something” but knowing how to do something within the context of e-learning that they could not do before. In other words, they wanted to be shown possibilities and best practice and they wanted to discover and USE tools which would enable them to create their *own resources* for their own cohorts of learners.

The best classroom teachers have always understood the importance of active rather than passive learning, of engendering a sense of achievement and of designing and using resources which are engaging and challenging. They understand the importance of using a whole range of strategies and tools – written, practical, visual, aural and multimedia.

The best classroom teachers have always recognised that they need to create opportunities for differentiation, allowing each learner to learn at their own pace, free from self-consciousness or stigma. They realise that they need to find ways to help and support each individual and to provide feedback, both formative and summative, in order to give each student sense of worth and achievement.

The best classroom teachers have always realised the continuing need to give learners every opportunity to use and demonstrate their abilities.

Critics of e-learning would probably claim that herein lies the inherent weakness of online learning in that it can never tick all these boxes. Certainly it's true when so much of what gets called "e-learning" is so passive and so stale. I've seen it. It sucks!

So much of what passes for e-learning simply presents learners with viewable online resources. Simply linking PowerPoint slides, handouts, tests and assignments or providing website links in an online lesson or scheme of work is inherently passive. Of course, if it creates wider access to resources and learning materials, then great. But in my experience a good teacher wants to be an *active* part of each student’s learning experience whether that occurs within the classroom or outside.

So we have to ask whether e-learning can deliver. Can e-learning still enable the teacher to be “with” the student to guide, cajole, encourage, stimulate and feedback to individual learners?

In my opinion the emphatic answer is yes. The online tools that we now have enable teachers and learners to communicate and collaborate outside the classroom as well as within it. They extend dialogue between teachers and learners and between learners themselves. They allow learners to receive individual feedback in ways which make e-mail seem archaic. They allow individual learners to learn at their own speed, to review materials as often as they like until they feel confident in their knowledge or understanding. They allow eager learners to challenge themselves with new and more difficult tasks at the point when they themselves feel ready to do so – and all of this free from the constraints of timetables and classrooms.

So what are some of these tools? Almost all are simple to create and use. They are tools which can be used to challenge learners collectively and individually. Tools which gives them new opportunities to express themselves and demonstrate their learning.

For example;

Creating online groups of learners - where teachers or trainers can choose to be members of the group to monitor activity and guide the learners. Within these online groups students can exchange ideas and collaborate on projects as well as exchange files and images. Night or day. Saturday or Sunday. No limits.

Reflective text based or multimedia blogs where students, at their leisure and in their chosen context, can again express themselves and apply their learning through an engaging and stimulating medium. Learners create Blogs where comments and notes can be added by third parties - including the teacher.

The use of audio and video feedback to individual learners. It now takes only minutes to create instantly available personalised feedback to learners online. At its most basic this can be text comments in an online group or blog or it could use audio or video just as quickly and simply.

It is my conviction that most learners learn best and enjoy learning best using resources that have been selected, adapted or created by their own teachers rather than being referred to a website, an online video in You Tube, or to other third party resources.

They enjoy studying with resources that have been created by their teachers for them, for their class, and for the context within which they are studying. These resources could be anything from textbased resources to their teachers own video recordings audio podcasts used to support the learning journey.

The 3 C’s.

So far, so good.  
Let’s accept for a moment that e-learning can deliver more than a passive learning experience and that the teacher / learner relationship is not diminished in fundamental ways through e-learning. We then have to find strategies to give teachers the **confidence,** the **competence** and most importantly the **context** within which such learning can be delivered.

E-Teaching.

Quite rightly e-learning has become a hot topic in education. This is partly because of the ways in which younger learners engage with technology, partly because new and free tools are available to help us deliver online learning and increasingly because of the cost savings which it can enable without detriment to the quality or value of the learning which takes place.

In relation to technology and e-learning, I think we have to recognise that there are probably four categories of teachers and trainers within institutions.

1. “Comfortable Residents”

There are those who are comfortable with learning technology. They comfortably "reside" in the digital world. They are early adopters and experimenters. They're happy to click and see what happens. They are excited by learning technology and the impact it can have on the learners.

1. “Digital or e-learning "Wannabes”

There are the digital or e-learning "Wannabes”. They really want to develop and be shown the tools of e-learning. They've seen the impact it can have. They are excited by the potential. They are self motivated to learn how they can create online resources and deliver e-learning in its fullest sense. They are motivated certainly. What they generally lack is not the time but the opportunity.

1. “Reluctant Adopters”.

There are still so many of these. They reluctantly adopt some basic e-learning practices. Many simply want to be seen to be using I LT. Some others are under pressure from the learners to provide the quality of resources which those learners may have experienced elsewhere. These people pay “lip service” to e-learning, generally adding a few handouts or weblinks to their programmes of study.

1. “The Cynics/Old school”.

I was famously once told "You can keep your technology - Give me a stick of chalk or a whiteboard marker and I'll show you how to teach". I will never say that you need e-learning to inspire and engage learners. Manifestly this is not the case. Nothing can ever replace the power and impact of great classroom delivery. But anyone who condemns or denies the potential of e-learning to reach learners, widen participation and empower each individual learner, simply has their head in the sand. We have a huge new toolkit available to us and we should be using it.

Moving Forward

Do we settle for the status quo? Actually, no.   
Let’s revisit our four stereotypes and examine some options.

We have our E-learning pioneers. “The comfortable Residents” - Probably largely self-taught and enthusiastic about E-Learning. Let’s use them. They generally only get “wheeled out” to demonstrate stuff on “E-learning day” or at the end of a semester. They know how to do stuff with technology. They find and try new stuff. They must become catalysts.  
Why don’t we introduce them to our Wannabes…… Why don’t we create relaxed contexts and development opportunities, teacher to teachers, where our experts can share their ideas and knowledge with the enthusiastic Wannabes” - Practical working sessions where participants have something to “take home”.  
This is a model that works. I’ve tried it. It works because of goodwill and professionalism. And guess what? It doesn’t take long for our Wannabes to become “Comfortable Residents” eventually taking their turn to cascade knowledge and skills in the same way.

Yes, I know. That’s the easy part. From here, goodwill and enthusiasm for E-Learning will be harder to find.  
  
The “Reluctant Adopters”.  
We all know one. Maybe you are one. Unfortunately, it’s so easy to find reasons not to embrace E-learning – especially within the classroom. You know…. Stuff like

“We don’t have a proper VLE like Blackboard or Moodle”  
“We don’t have enough computer rooms”  
“Half the time, the network is down or the equipment doesn’t work”

I have lots of sympathy for these sentiments. The strategy to get them more fully on board requires carrots and sticks. They won’t volunteer their time to join our “Comfortable Residents” and Wannabes. They won’t come to you. You have to go to them. Importantly, these are the “swing voters”. They need to be brought more fully on board.  
They need to be “given” structured time and training possibly on “in service” training days or occasionally, “in lieu” of regular meeting times.   
They need to be brought into progressive teaching teams where technology and e-learning are embedded and almost taken for granted. They need to be told “If you want to teach on this programme, this is how we do things”. Professional pride, the need for them to closely collaborate with progressive teachers, pressure from the cohort of learners used to e-learning and their recognition that swimming against the tide is really hard work, should take care of the rest.  
  
The “Old School Cynics”

Well, can you name one? (I am assuming you are not one). Regrettably, we probably need to create E-Learning “environments” for them. There need to be frameworks or portals via which learners must navigate to the online content which has been provided by the “cynic”. Probably this is very basic, but for them, probably passes for a programme of study. These portals need to be rich with generic course related resources and so can compensate, to some extent, for the paucity of what, in e-learning terms, might lie beyond.  
Yes, by doing this, we will to some extent be doing a colleagues job for them. However, our focus must be the learner and the quality of the overall learning experience they receive and perceive. Beyond this, quality assurance safeguards such as lesson observation and appraisal need to play their part in keeping the customers satisfied.

An E-Learning Development Model.

Online support

Plenty of goodwill here and a real willingness to learn from ‘Comfortable Resident’ colleagues. Create “spaces” for interaction. Flexibility & some informality in session timings is  
crucial...... Remember, these are your “volunteers”.

Use them! Introduce them to our ‘Wannabes’. Create development opportunities, teacher to teacher(s). Practical working sessions where participants have something to “Take Home”

Online support, tutorials and  
guidance

Require them to input their basic subject content to a pre-loaded course portal where course relevant E-Learning resources will frame their individual content. The “Old School” teacher will hopefully become a “Reluctant Adopter”

Bring them on board. Create structured, more formal development opportunities for them. Recruit them to E-savvy course teams. Within teams, support them to deliver true E-Learning.

Share

An external audience? - Opportunities for commercialisation.

1. Selling the workshop “Spaces”, referred to in the model, to external 3rd parties.
2. Packaging and selling the resources.
3. Selling the online programme.

“……the best innovation in instructional practice is coming from the "bottom up" - from teachers who find effective ways to harness the creative energy of their students. These teachers don't simply deliver information to kids, they craft lessons where students can research, collaborate, and reflect on what they're learning. They harness a flood of new platforms that enable students "see" information in new ways and support a more self-directed style of learning. Unlike the expensive wares being hawked by the convention vendors, most of these web tools are free.”

Peter Pappas: <http://peterpappas.blogs.com/copy_paste/2011/03/innovations-in-teaching-and-learning-top-down-or-bottom-up.html>

