

## Talking, learning and sharing: HEI Forum Professional Dialogue Seminars

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### Introduction

In December 2007 the West Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (WMCETT) in conjunction with the primary providers of teacher training in the West Midlands, namely the Universities of Wolverhampton, Warwick, Staffordshire, Worcester and Birmingham City, established a forum to support the development of the new ITT qualifications and the CPD requirements for the sector.

The Forum hosted a series of professional dialogue seminars during 2009-10 funded by LSIS, with the aim of enabling practitioners to share practice and influence the nature and design of ITT programmes. Themes for the seminars came from practitioners and focused on areas of the programme they found challenging to deliver and a report was both published on the WMCETT website and forwarded to professional bodies.

The seminars were one-day events with separate topics for morning and afternoon sessions. Teacher educators from each of the colleges in the partnership were invited to attend and give a five minute presentation of their practice in small groups. The main points from the presentations and following discussions were fed back to the whole group at the end of each session with each participant action planning three main points they were taking into their practice.

The themes for the seminars were:

*Seminar 1:* Initial assessment and the minimum core in curriculum design and developing the skills of critical thinking and reflective evaluation

*Seminar 2:* The use of mobile technologies and their effectiveness in a teaching context

*Seminar 3:* Embedding equal opportunities and diversity in an ITT programme.

### Impact from the professional dialogue seminars

Participants found it reassuring that colleagues in other centres were experiencing the same challenges and valued the sharing of ideas, opportunities for networking and collegial discussion. The following short reports of each seminar outline the main points Teacher Educators took into their practice.

#### Seminar 1

Whilst not all providers adopted the same approach to entry requirements and initial assessments sharing these was helpful and Teacher Educators took the following strategies into their practice:

- the use of written comprehension tests for DTLLS initial assessment
- building in a '0' level pre-entry course, which might include PTLLS, academic writing, study skills, reflective thinking skills
- structuring the ILP over the five year QTLS framework to include essential skills, academic writing, study skills, reflective thinking skills
- working on a systematic approach to evaluating initial assessment.

Minimum core development should occur throughout the two years of the programme for both knowledge and skills, with subject specialism and assignments mapped to minimum core.

There were concerns around recruitment and developing the initial assessment process to ensure that students are directed on to the correct qualification.

The main points practitioners took from discussion of critical thinking included:

- investigating how to assess a trainee's level of critical thinking at interview and during initial assessment
- developing definitions of critical thinking and ways to embed its application in practice
- creating opportunities for observing and developing critical thinking skills, both online and face to face
- reviewing courses to include more critical thinking
- recording critical thinking more effectively.



Participants also discussed the issue of ‘measuring’ critical thinking skills and the general feeling was that the assessment of these skills should be integrated rather than separately measured.

### **Seminar 2**

The second seminar on mobile technologies began with a presentation and demonstration by Allen Crawford-Thomas of RSC-West Midlands. A lively discussion followed with Teacher Educators sharing the different technologies and strategies they used in their teaching. Ideas that were gleaned from colleagues and taken back to their teams included:

- using a ‘live’ discussion forum where all learners have to be logged on at a certain time to take part instead of attending a classroom session
- buying e-books on key or expensive texts for use online to ensure all trainees have access to them
- using pods (small groups of trainees collaborating online) as a strategy to increase trainee engagement.

Blended learning generated a lot of discussion. Teacher Educators currently delivering blended learning programmes were enthusiastic but noted the need for careful structuring and clear initial assessment of trainees’ actual ICT skills. They had found that it worked well for year 2 of the DTLLS programme with IT skills developed in the first year. Teacher Educators not currently delivering blended learning programmes are now investigating its use as a means of enhancing the learning experience and making programmes more flexible and inclusive.

It was recognised that Teacher Educators may need support for their own IT skills and development in order to assess and support the skills of trainees.

### **Seminar 3**

‘Equal opportunities’, ‘equality’ and ‘diversity’ generated a thoughtful discussion about different interpretations of these terms. Participants found that sharing methods to actively promote equality rather than just responding to the issues was particularly helpful. The main learning points taken into practice were:

- sharing E&D experiences and approaches with trainees by being more explicit about how this is integrated into different aspects of the ITT programme
- exploring pedagogical models which underpin E&D with trainees to stimulate discussion and raise awareness of issues
- generating time to share both good practice and problem areas in Teacher Educator team meetings
- the need to capture, monitor, audit and carry out impact assessments of E&D was recognised and Teacher Educators were investigating ways of doing this effectively
- living libraries concept (individuals who are prepared to share specific life experiences, for instance: asylum seekers, offenders, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities who can be ‘borrowed’ to share their experiences) met with enthusiasm. Teacher Educators were using this concept to meet specific trainee E&D development needs or to give trainees exposure to people with a wide range of different life experiences, needs, backgrounds, abilities/disabilities.

### **Sustainability**

Following the success of the Professional Dialogue seminars, the HEI Forum agreed to fund a further series in 2010-2011. We are all looking forward to another year of stimulating and thought-provoking discussion that provides us with new ideas and approaches for developing our practice.

