ILT for the nervous: how an early years section made the journey from the slate to the virtual learning environment

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1. The organisation

Bridgwater College is a Beacon College in Somerset. The early years section provides a unique, holistic integrated training experience for its 500-plus learners. It is a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) and integrates teaching and learning with a government-designated children's centre on the college site. The Ofsted/ALI survey of the early years CoVE in May 2005 highlighted outstanding teaching. Strong links between theory and practice, using inspirational resources in a newly purpose-built environment, enable all students to proceed to employment or further study through robust progression routes. The section has been participating in the subject learning coaching programme using the former DfES Standards Unit's teaching and learning resources, some of which originated and were developed by staff and learners in the section. All students access Bridgwater College Forest School which achieved the Queen's Anniversary Prize in 2000.

The staff are passionate about their work, taking every opportunity for continuous professional development to keep at the cutting-edge of practice. Innovation and flexibility are two of the features that encourage high recruitment and achievement amongst adult learners and increase widening participation. Recent focus has been on the development of information and learning technology (ILT) and the use of blended learning, interactive whiteboards and laptops within the classroom.
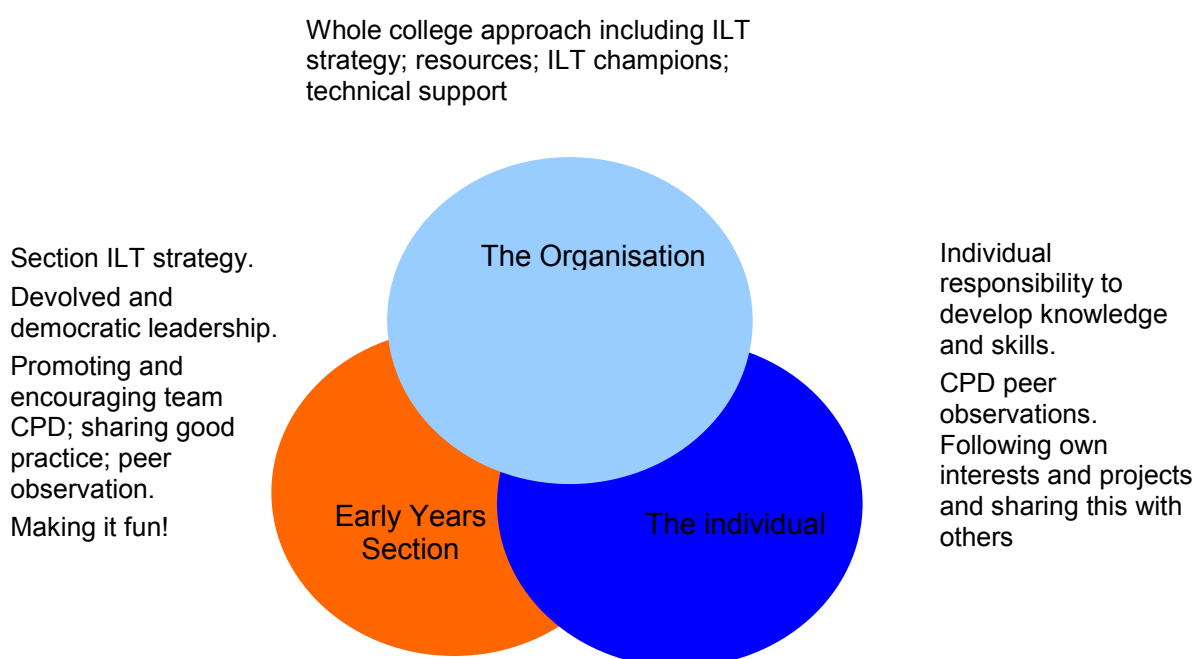
2. Overview

The presentation upon which this paper is based concentrated on:

- continuing professional development in ILT;

- blogging;

- whiteboard activities; and

- what makes the approach work for individuals.

3. The detail

3.1 Approach

Whole college approach including ILT strategy; resources; ILT champions; technical support

Section ILT strategy.

Devolved and democratic leadership.

Promoting and encouraging team CPD; sharing good practice; peer observation.

Making it fun!

The Organisation

Early Years Section

The individual

Individual responsibility to develop knowledge and skills.

CPD peer observations. Following own interests and projects and sharing this with others

3.2 Scale

Ten years ago staff knew next to nothing about ILT. We have made a strategic effort to develop staff skills and encourage innovation through training, sharing good practice, peer observations and investment in resources. A major contribution to this success has been the engagement of senior managers, which has been essential. Another has been the use of our virtual learning environment (VLE), in this case Blackboard.

The NVQ level 3 course on children's care, learning and development (five mandatory units and 41 optional units) has been loaded onto Blackboard. This has proved to save paper and puts learners more in charge of their curriculum choices. In other courses (for example the higher national diploma [HND]) learners choose how they use the handouts published on the VLE, annotate them if they need, or use them as a backup for lesson notes. The VLE courses are set-up college-wide. Usage within Blackboard varies according to the demands of each course, but all are personalised by course teams.

We moved practice forward by recognising personal skills in the use of digital cameras, white boards and so on, and developed a peer observation/support system to do this. This was a structured process: all staff were involved (in pairs); one would be observed and one would observe. Whole team meetings were undertaken with fun aspects included to lighten the process (for example the team all did CLAIT together with doughnuts provided). Staff who remain reluctant to use ILT are often encouraged by learner demand. Their own children are often also drivers for change.

The college appraisal process enquires about personal training needs relating to ILT.

3.3 Impact…

…on learners, teachers, partners, staff etc

There has been positive learner feedback particularly from part-time adults. Blackboard and blogging enables them to keep in touch, to catch up missed sessions and to work at their own pace. This has led to improved retention and results on all adult programmes. For 16-19s ILT has improved their presentation skills and increased enjoyment in class. Learner reviews without exception ask for more use of computers, laptops and interactive whiteboards. Learners report on the value of ILT skills as they progress onto higher education.

Our continuing professional development (CPD) strategy has enabled even the least confident staff to become motivated. We have overcome natural resistance to change to the extent where every member of staff has an input into the VLE and ILT is a normal part of any lesson plan. Confidence in using the hardware and software is one aspect but probably more crucial is the desire to innovate and extend the creative use of ILT and not be afraid to make a first attempt.

… on the organisation

In our most recent Ofsted annual assessment visit the college was graded as outstanding. Best practice in ILT has been identified in Ofsted reviews across the majority of curriculum areas. The enthusiasm and commitment of staff in taking on board new initiatives is a particular strength noted.

4. Contact details

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