THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

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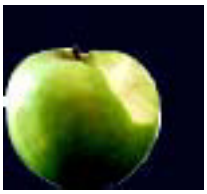
The Pathfinder Journey:
University of Northampton



THE BITE PROJECT

1. The way we were

During the e-learning benchmarking exercise (ELBME) at the University of Northampton, one of the areas identified as an opportunity for further development was in staff development. Academic staff from various subject areas believed that they would benefit from having access to training resources and staff development in the use of technologies for e-learning. They felt that within their own schools, they had very few opportunities to develop their awareness or skills in using new technologies or to find out more about enhancing their learning and teaching provision predominantly through a lack of time, but also because they did not always know where to go for help. Feedback also suggested that teaching staff rarely had the time or inclination to attend centrally hosted training sessions and often couldn't see why or how general sessions on enhancing e-learning provision were relevant to their teaching or subject area.

The e-Learning strand of the University of Northampton's (TUON) Learning and Teaching Strategy recognises the importance of staff development and has a target to: 'scope and design an accredited on-line e-Learning certificate' considering the findings of the ELBME there was some debate as to how to best proceed with this – should an opportunity be integrated within TUON's PGCTHE or should e-learning exist as a staff development exercise in its own right? It was agreed that TUON should build upon previous and current work in this area: in 2002, internal learning and teaching funding had been awarded to CAMIL (Course on Applied Management of Integrated Learning), this modular course was designed to tutor academic staff in the pedagogy of online learning while providing an opportunity to experience e-learning for themselves. This course ran for a one year period until affected by service cuts. However, this trial endorsed the outcomes of ELBME, identifying that many staff, both part and full-time do not have the time to engage in time -specific training sessions but prefer to access, in their own time, specific areas which meet their own needs.

Working on this principle it was agreed that CAMIL would have been more effective if the resources had offered staff the opportunity to manage their own learning, offering personal choice on the learning pathway which could be achieved if the resources themselves were more 'bite sized' so that staff could dip in and out as and when they had the need or opportunity. Employing the bite size concept is not new at TUON, which had previously received funding from the European Social Fund to develop small 'chunks' of learning for business. Evaluation to date demonstrates that this is an effective method of learning and in terms of CPD and it was considered that bite size learning may answer the needs identified in ELBME and may evolve into the accredited certificate that is the target of the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

2. Aims and Objectives

The aim of the BITE project was to create a suite of bite sized 'chunks' of learning, to allow all staff access to specific information and guidance about the pedagogy of e-learning and the practical applications of learning technologies. The intention was that the BITE's would be available for staff to pick and choose from when they have time or a specific query – so they manage their own learning. Within the same environment staff would have access to a social network of peers where they could share knowledge or experiences. In addition the BITE's would also be structured in such a way that it was possible for staff to follow a specific pathway to understand how to develop enhanced e-learning course materials.

A project designer would develop the BITE's using a standard software development lifecycle which required:

Analysis of materials in subject area,
Development of BITE's,
Implementation
User review and evaluation
Analysis and redevelopment
Integration into training and staff development

The materials for the BITE's would be developed in a way that didn't involve re-inventing the wheel, for example they would incorporate case studies identified during the e-learning benchmarking exercise, staff development materials from WELA, The University of Warwick E-Learning Award, materials from the HEA Subject Centres and from JISC projects. The project designer would also work closely with the project team from the JISC project E4L (also based at TUON) in order to incorporate the student voice into the materials. It was felt that it was important to raise staff awareness of the HEA subject centres and the JISC e-learning and assessment guides through BITE.

The BITE's would be subject specific, which would address the ELBME findings that staff needed to understand e-learning from a personalised context. Making it subject specific meant that staff could look at resources and guidance on new technologies and see how technology was being used to enhance learning within their subject area either from their own school or within the wider FE/HE community. The BITE's would also be available as a general resource (non subject specific) available within the University through the learning technology team's website. The BITE project also had an objective to share the BITE's with the wider community.

The BITE's would be visually interesting and easy to navigate, and would incorporate case studies from the schools and therefore become a way of raising awareness of internal and external projects. The project would also incorporate a social area for staff to discuss issues, share experiences with one another or ask questions and the BITE project would be promoted within the PGCTHE. The project team also would work closely with the PGCTHE course team to identify integration points for the BITE materials.
The BITE's would be designed in using a social constructivist approach to give learners choice and ownership of learning. As much as possible staff (as learners) would be given choice in how to access the resources.
The BITE project would also measure the cost of e-learning development for the BITE's and look at ways of measuring their value for money

3. Intended Outcomes

By enhancing the staff development materials, making the materials available in a number of ways and by promoting the project to schools as a personalised resource the BITE project had a number of intended outcomes:

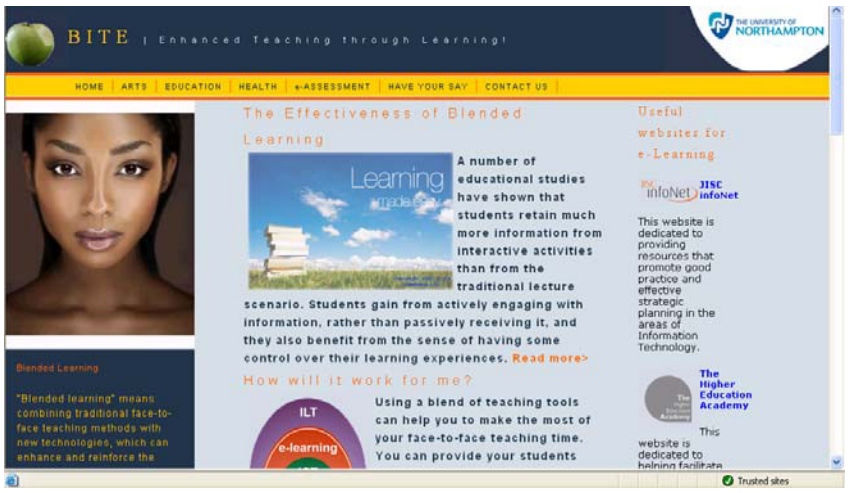
- It would make staff development materials personalised, more accessible and based on a choice structure – for staff to choose what they wanted to learn about.
- It could impact on staff working practices by demonstrating methods of course development and assessment in a focused and more inventive way.
- It would give greater understanding of the costs of e-learning development for UN and the sector
- An increase in the quality and proportion of blended learning which will support the aims of the UN e-strategy.
- A model of delivery which would be transferable between schools and institutions
- The BITE methodology to become standard as way of developing staff development materials
- Develop close links with JISC project e4L to get the student voice to run through the staff development materials.

4. The story so far. . .

It took some time at the start of the project to recruit the project designer but once employed the project started to take off. The first school to work with was the School of the Arts, and the project manager and designer worked closely with e-learning champions and other users from the school and with the school academic librarian to analyse materials and resources that were required in order to develop the BITE's for the six subject areas within this school.

There were some delays creating the first school materials – initially the project designer spent time creating materials in a format that users found to be visually exciting but not as accessible or easy to integrate with other resources such as the VLE. The project team therefore decided to change the format to a suite of easily navigable web pages – the project designer spent considerable time recreating the materials, to retain the remit of creating a visually stimulating environment. The revised materials were ready for evaluation at the beginning of the new academic year so getting staff at the busiest time of the year to evaluate the materials proved very time consuming, eventually however, we were able to run a number of events for the staff within the School of the Arts and get their feedback and evaluation about BITE. This then fed into the development lifecycle and their recommendations for changes and updates were taken into account and the BITE materials were redeveloped with their evaluation in mind and sent out for more feedback.

The work on the School of the Arts BITE's went over the allocated project time but it was decided at the Steering Committee that this a reasonable delay as it was crucial to get the first set of BITE's right as this structure and layout would then become the template for all future BITE's. The designer was able to successfully create a visually stimulating environment with resources incorporated from a wide range of sources using a 'template' approach which was transferable to the School of Health which are came on stream next. The template allowed common themes such as 'Enhancing Classroom Teaching' to be transferable but easily customized to schools' contexts.



The BITE project has created a suite of learning resources for the School of the Arts and the School of Health at the University of Northampton.

The BITE Project: http://www.northampton.ac.uk/bite

The project designer worked closely with the academic librarian and the learning and teaching co-ordinator from the school to find examples from within the wider community. This proved an opportunity to develop a number of links with e-learning professionals and other universities and projects. The BITE project's critical friend, Andrew Comrie was also an invaluable source of advice on some of the case studies that were available to the wider community. Unfortunately it proved time-consuming and impractical for the small core project team to record internal case studies and so the central learning technologists agreed to continue developing internal subject specific case studies for the BITE project on an ongoing basis.

Consultation with school staff has proved invaluable in terms of getting the materials right and for raising awareness in the project. Meeting tutors allowed the designer to achieve personalisation in the subject areas by providing bespoke tailoring highlighting specified discrete interests in technologies/approaches through Case Studies, Images, Video and Audio. Interoperability, in so far as MAC user's are concerned, has also been achieved which is significant in arts/fine arts areas. The BITE's are also very accessible and the 'choice' architecture avoids complex deep linking common to websites that host lots of resources and information.

Promotional events have raised awareness of the project across the university and schools that have not yet had subject specific BITE's created have still invited project staff and learning technologists to speak and demonstrate the project. BITE has also been listed as a dissemination platform for two internal projects, this is a development supported by the Office of Learning and Teaching and will help to keep case studies and materials up-to-date and continue engagement with the community.

Involving the academic librarians has also encouraged their engagement with the project and has raised their awareness of the use of e-learning within schools and subject areas. Engaging the learning technologists (LT's) who provide training and staff development in e-learning with the BITE project has proved to be a real success. The learning technologists who are centrally based have adopted BITE to use as part of their regular training and development. This familiarises the LT's with the materials from the project and allows them to encourage and engage staff with the project. In addition it provides the project team with a working evaluation of the materials and the extra contributions from the LT's.

5. The ongoing path

As we come to the end of the funded project, the buy-in from the academic staff involved has confirmed that BITE has a place within staff development resources for the University. Pathfinder has allowed the University to create a focused and interactive area for e-learning developments, where academic staff and learning technologists can both access information and add to the richness of the materials on offer. BITE has now been adopted as a learning and staff development resource by the learning technologists, it is expected that BITE will continue to grow with their support. The learning technologists play a central role in encouraging staff to use BITE and to engage in social areas for discussion and support. The LT's can use BITE to provide support to staff and to assist with practical, further guidance on any of the technologies that are demonstrated on BITE.

There is also a potential for this to become an excellent resource in sharing experiences and projects across the university. As the learning technologists engage with staff and encourage them to use BITE resources, they are then in a position to evaluate and record case studies of staff experiences, which they can add to the BITE resources. With this awareness of the materials available they will in an ideal position to disseminate cross-subject information about content in BITE, raising awareness across the university on how other schools are developing their e-learning provision. Having a central platform to share experiences and case studies will keep BITE fresh and of use to staff across the university and beyond.

The use of BITE as a dissemination platform for e-learning projects is also fully supported by the Office of Learning and Teaching at TUON and this will continue to raise the profile of BITE and help to keep the materials and case studies current and relevant to the local and possibly the wider community and it is our intention to continue to make BITE materials available to all via the web.

Currently the postgraduate Certificate in HE at TUON comprises of a number of taught sessions, supported by school based mentoring sessions. Over the next academic year there will be some integration of the subject specific BITE's into the school based support within the PGCTHE via the University's e-learning environment, NILE. In the future, the BITE project will be integrated into the development of bite sized accredited provision and this will not only meet the target of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy but it will also effectively feed into the University's action plan for the implementation of the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for teaching and supporting learning in HE. This action plan involves the development of a CPD infrastructure for staff engaged in supporting learning and provides learning and teaching career pathways for staff. The deliverables from the BITE project will be effectively integrated into this infrastructure, complementing other developing foundation provision and affording a flexible mode of learning.

Through the support of the Office of Learning and Teaching and the Learning and Teaching co-ordinators, it is anticipated that BITE will also be used to support e-learning actions plans within the schools and for future academic planning processes.

Although the BITE project designer has now left the project, the template design that was created will continue to be used to keep current BITE's for the School of the Arts and the School of Health updated. Development for other schools will also be considered.

6. Wider Context

In a year long project it is difficult to fully evaluate the impact of this project, but initial indicators suggest that projects such as these are more successful if they

get the buy-in of the staff involved. This was achieved by getting academic staff involved in the design and evaluation of materials and resources on BITE and by personalising materials to the subject area.
This project has also gained a higher profile because of the inclusion of member of the Office of Learning and Teaching, the subject Librarians and the central Learning Technology team as part of the wider team. This support will ensure that BITE can continue to be a central dissemination platform for ongoing projects and experiences. In addition working with a number of school staff and support departments has reduced the problem of continuously reinventing the wheel in different areas even within the same university.

While the project was informed by e-learning benchmarking exercise, it was also informed by the HEFCE e-learning strategy (March 2005 - 12). One of the expected outcomes for the future is that as a result of engaging with this approach to learning, academic staff will gain direct experience of how best to engage their students with the theory of learning bites and personal choice, so the concept as well as the content will be valuable. This relates to Strand 1 of the HEFCE E-Learning Strategy "to produce and disseminate models of good e-learning practice including assessment" (1.4)

The creation of BITE's is consistent with the UN Learning and Teaching Strategy and also Strand 2 and 4 of the HEFCE E-Learning Strategy, in developing "a comprehensive and coherent approach to the development and use of resources for learning and teaching" (2.1) and promoting "the sharing of learning technology and resources across the HE sector and between sectors" (2.3). In the future BITE will be integrated within a formal CPD pathway to enable development of "skills, knowledge and competencies for e-learning in training and continuing professional development for learning and teaching staff, including learning technologists", (4.4)

The BITE project will also address and support key mission areas of the HEA:
"3….lead support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in HE"
"4….To promote good practice in all aspects of support for the student learning experience"

One of the last aims of the BITE project was to measure the cost of e-learning development and this has raised interesting issues that may need to be explored further. This project team found it unworkable to measure the true cost of development of e-learning materials because the project employed a professional designer. Based on the creation of materials for the BITE project, it was found that the time spent by a technically aware professional to a novice is incomparable, as time spend on individual learning objects will be considerable less by the professional on an ongoing basis, as the designer will create a suite of templates and reusable learning objects that efficiently and effectively reduce time spent on subsequent designs. Academic staff who are engaged in creating similar materials are less likely to share their creations with peers but will spend large amounts of time creating learning objects for their students. While the individual academic staff may reuse their own materials, it is not usually as effective or polished as a professional design and when this is multiplied by all staff also creating their own materials from the outset there is a chance that the time spent on this level of design could be too high a cost for the actual benefit. While this needs further research, it is likely to show that the employment of a professional designer to support academic staff – whether a learning technologist, instructional designer or other e-learning professional is likely to have more cost benefit for the design of e-learning materials above letting non-technical academic staff 'just get on with it'!