

Networked Learning and the SIFT Model

C. M. Whitehouse*, C. S. Durbin** and H. U. Shah*

Staffordshire University *

Staffordshire LEA**

C.Whitehouse@staffs.ac.uk Chris.Durbin@staffordshire.gov.uk
H.Shah@staffs.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The New Opportunities Fund 'ICT for Teachers' initiative, aimed to deliver professional development training for all 'serving' teachers in the UK. The scale of the task, suggested that an alternative delivery format to traditional face-to-face training should be trialled. SIFT, as an approved training provider to the Government scheme, has created a highly structured model for designing and delivering course materials to remote learners, via a Virtual Learning Environment. The poster session includes a demonstration of SIFT content and illustrates the SIFT model, consisting of the '12 Unit grid', 'Coursework framework', 'virtual tutor' and 'navigational features', developed within the virtual space.

Keywords

SIFT model, Virtual Learning Environment, e-learning, ICT, teacher training, professional development.

THE SIFT MODEL

Continuing professional development for teachers has traditionally been delivered through face-to-face training. With the advent of the New Opportunities Fund 'ICT for Teachers' (NOF 2001) initiative in April 1999, the scale of the delivery task to train all 'serving' teachers to be confident and competent to teach using ICT (Information and Communications Technology) by the year 2002 (DfEE 1997), suggested that an alternative delivery format should be considered. In providing the training, the focus was to help teachers to use the technology within their *subject area* of the curriculum, rather than teaching purely how to use the technology.

The emerging ability to deliver training on-line, via the Internet, appeared to present a solution. Associated issues centred on: the design model to be applied; the pedagogy to be adopted; the content to be delivered; the appropriate support framework required and the technology to be used.

Staffordshire ICT for Teachers (SIFT), a collaboration between Staffordshire University and Staffordshire Local Education Authority, in the U.K, became a Government Approved Training Provider, to the 'ICT for Teachers' initiative. SIFT (1999) was approved as a national provider for England (following a competitive tendering process), to deliver ICT training to secondary teachers (of students aged 11-18), within the subjects of geography and design and technology. SIFT has created training materials for teachers, delivered directly into their working environment using a web-based Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), in this instance Lotus Learning Space.

The design methodology adopted by SIFT, was to create materials which were highly focused to the perceived needs of the users (Milligan 1999) and based on the 'learning on demand' paradigm. The aim was to provide the teacher with a clear concept of the environment in which they were working, to produce materials which were motivational and to offer ease of navigation whilst learning within the VLE. The '12

Unit grid', 'Coursework framework', 'virtual tutor' and 'navigational features' are the components of the SIFT model implemented. The SIFT '12 Unit grid' and 'Coursework framework' aid the teachers' conceptualisation within the VLE and provide a platform for the development of clear 'bite-sized' learning, incorporating the characteristics of the SIFT 'virtual tutor'. Reeves and Nass (1996) identify that when media conforms to social and natural rules, instruction for use is not necessary, thus, the SIFT 'virtual tutor' introduces the personality of the tutor and delivers Gagné's nine events of instruction, identified for any desired learning (Gagné1985). The final component of the SIFT model is the 'navigational features', which Britain and Liber (2000) reflect are important and intrinsically part of using a VLE.

SIFT received approval to deliver training under the NOF 'ICT for Teachers' initiative in February 1999. With the launch of SIFT geography training in January 2000, the initiative did not permit time for research of best design and materials. SIFT adopted an iterative practise to development, prototyping the materials and reacting to evaluation from teachers, integrating suggestions and new ideas within the content. In 2001, the UK Government Teacher Training Agency, quality assured the SIFT model and materials and reported: "*The model is actively chosen by schools, mainly because of it's subject specific nature and networking potential...The material and structure of the training can facilitate the development of significantly advanced pedagogical thinking and extend the use of ICT within the school.*" SIFT materials are currently being used by in excess of 1000 teachers, in England , Jersey and Germany and they have been trialled in Norway .

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