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# Effective practices: enhancing learning, teaching and student success

SOLSTICE and CLTR Conference 2011  
Edge Hill University 8–9 June 2011



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The annual SOLSTICE and CLTR Conference was held at Edge Hill University on 8 and 9 June 2011. The theme of this year's conference was 'enhancing learning, teaching and student success', with a particular focus on what works in practice. Over 150 academic staff, learning technologists, librarians and academic support staff attended, from as far afield as Hong Kong, South Africa and the USA.

The conference opened with a welcome from John Cater, Vice-Chancellor of Edge Hill University, who set the scene by underlining the importance of innovation even in these times of financial uncertainty. The challenges ahead for the UK higher education sector were a recurring theme throughout the two days, but the tone of the conference was far from pessimistic. In fact, the innovative projects and practices showcased at the conference served to underline the commitment of both academic and support staff to meeting those challenges and making a difference to the student experience.

## **BELONGING**

The first keynote speaker, Dr Mark Childs from Coventry University, described how virtual worlds such as Second Life can enhance student learning in ways that are difficult to achieve in the real world: abstract concepts can be visualised and interacted with, historical settings can be rec-

reated and role-play scenarios made more realistic. Mark cautioned, however, that social anxiety can get in the way of learning in virtual worlds: students need to feel comfortable with their avatar to be 'co-present' in the virtual world and build an emotional connection to their surroundings. The idea of identity, connection and belonging as vital ingredients in effective learning was one that was echoed throughout the conference.

In the second keynote Becca Colley, Dean of Students at the University of Bradford, spoke about methods of engaging students both before and during their time at university. She underlined the importance of creating a welcoming environment as well as delivering high quality, personalised academic support. Becca described how the University of Bradford uses social networks including Ning, Facebook and Twitter to provide new and prospective students with information and opportunities for social interaction. This enables the university both to manage expectations and to foster a sense of belonging among students before they even enrol.

## **RETENTION**

The second day of the conference began with a keynote from Professor Tony Cook of the University of Ulster on one of the major challenges facing universities: retention. Tony outlined how prospective students' expectations, together with the directed nature of their learning experiences in schools, can make students ill-prepared for life at university. He argued that universities need to adapt to students' expectations and prior experience by providing the information they need to make informed pre-entry choices and by communicating the 'rules of the game' – in other words, the academic demands of university study. Echoing Becca Colley's concern with belonging, Tony highlighted the lack of cultural capital to promote identification with the institution and the feeling of being an outsider as key reasons why students leave early. Both academic and social integration, he argued, are necessary to improve retention.

## **LEARNING INCOMES**

The final keynote from Phil Race, Visiting Professor at the University of Plymouth, continued this theme. As well as sharing a range of practical techniques to engage students in the classroom, Phil highlighted the need to focus not just on learning outcomes but also on 'learning incomes': the set of beliefs, values, attitudes and experiences students bring with them to university. He went

on to argue that the emotional or affective aspects of learning – students' 'wants' and 'needs' – are often ignored in traditional models of learning but are nonetheless crucial to student achievement.

In addition to the keynotes, delegates had the opportunity to attend a wide variety of breakout presentations and workshops on topics ranging from andragogy (adult learning) to augmented reality (using the locational data available via mobile devices to enhance learning). In many of these sessions too there was a focus on social interaction, learner identity and a recognition that the student experience is not simply an academic one.

With four keynotes and over 50 breakout sessions, there was far more at the SOLSTICE and CLTR Conference than can be covered in this article. For those who would like to find out more, abstracts of all the presentations can be downloaded from the conference website: <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/solstice/conference2011/>