The Importance of Promoting Digital Literacy among Beginning Teachers of Classics

Richard Morgan

In an age where we are surrounded by more and more digital media all the time, it is easy to assume that those entering the teaching profession will be literate in the use of such media, along with the hardware and software that is necessary to access and employ it.

Once in the classroom we all develop our own routines and many of the things we do become second nature. At times, we find ourselves excited at having learned a new trick or a slightly better way of presenting digital media, but in essence a core understanding of our digital tools is embedded firmly in what we do. The range of availability is vast and this is not the place to address a wide range of techniques. My aim is to implore colleagues working with those entering the teaching profession that the digital literacy and proficiency you have can be as important a scaffold to help beginning teachers with as, say, behavioural strategies are.

When a beginning teacher starts to take an active role in the classroom, it can be tempting to either offer a very prescriptive range of activities to them or to offer them the ‘blank canvas’. Frequently, the latter approach can instigate a range of concerns: ‘death by PowerPoint’, broken slides with failed animations or clips, reams of text displayed that looked fine on the desktop computer but illegible on the display-screen or interactive whiteboard. Add to these some low resolution images, wacky fonts, colour combinations that do not work and animations with little discernible purpose and you can end up with a less than satisfactory outcome. Yet these mistakes are exactly the ones that can be frequently seen in the presentations pupils themselves produce. Should this surprise us hugely? In all honesty probably not – there is a temptation with software that offers all sorts of options to choose items that seem attractive and creative. Pragmatism is perhaps the element that is overlooked.

What role can a more experienced teacher play? Research often categorises the development of beginning teachers into three stages: ‘fitting in’, ‘passing the test’ and ‘exploring’ (cf. Furlong and Maynard (1995) after Calderhead (1987)). In that ‘fitting in’ stage it can be worthwhile limiting the creative flexibility that is available. Although a beginning teacher might initially be frustrated if they are restricted to using certain templates (be they for presentations, word processing or handout publications), this in many ways can be seen as providing stabilisers that can be removed. As the beginning teacher identifies individually what works and what does not, that framework can in fact provide much support for the success of their teaching.

The Homeric Mentor did not just send Telemachus off to gather a crew but gave him discrete instructions in Ithaca whilst arranging the rigging of the ship himself, as well as later providing reassurances in Pylos as Telemachus struggled with how to address King Nestor and maintain the hope of his father’s survival. Mentor helps Telemachus reach his goals in a manner that supports and slowly enables Telemachus to make his own decisions. Telemachus is not able to see the guiding divine hand of Athene in the background and at times that guiding hand must play a part in the mentoring of beginning teachers. Freedom to explore the more creative side of digital media can be given gradually once the basic competence is fully understood. This can perhaps then counter the stage Calderhead identifies whereby beginning teachers ‘begin to view the placement as an assessment task in which they have to adopt particular types of behaviour that signal competence and please the supervising tutor’ as explained by Furlong and Maynard (1995).

Another interesting stage of development is the transition to the stage identified by Fuller and Brown (1975) where a comfortable routine arises that seems to work well with a class and the ideas of Kagan (1992) apply here. As the beginning teacher sees certain strategies work, it can be tempting to retain them and avoid experimenting further. This is just as true of the use of digital media as it is of any other strategy and I am going to use a case study to demonstrate that a persistence of input by a mentor can still be beneficial in improving the digital literacy of a beginning teacher.

In this instance, a trainee teacher had made a promising start to the second professional placement of a PGCE course and it was apparent that this individual was both confident and highly competent in the classroom. It was suggested at an early stage of the placement (within two weeks of first teaching) that the use of software specific to the interactive whiteboards available in the school might be a consideration for this trainee. As time passed, this became a regular feature of lesson observations.

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and feedback. This could have been the point at which the beginning teacher was just left to their routine and allowed to continue delivering highly competent lessons that were making adequate use of ICT. However, to a persistent mentor the opportunity to help this beginning teacher deliver lessons with a higher quality of digital media was one that seemed worth risking a battle of wills.

By this stage the underlying issue centred on the use of one particular style of worksheet that the beginning teacher had devised. In style and function this worksheet design was effective and the pupils were able to gain much from these sheets. As a mentor, a dilemma was now to be faced. I could see that these sheets were going to be used regularly. As a hand-out they were perfectly acceptable but it had now become routine to display the worksheet on the interactive whiteboard in its raw word-processed (Microsoft Word) format. This can be seen in Figure 1, where the most significant concern in my mind was that for a Year 8 Latin class, having numerous words underlined in red and green (suggestions of error in grammar or spelling) would pose confusion when there were numerous Latin verbs (in this case) that had been underlined in black for additional focus. In addition to this, the appearance on screen was very cluttered, with all the word-processing toolbars displayed, as well as significant margin spaces that made it nearly impossible for pupils at the back of a room to actually read the text effectively from the screen. It seemed that the display of the resource on the screen was being conducted with noble intentions but there were several ways in which the student experience was being limited, many as a result of the choice of software.

Feedback on observation records and informal discussions about trying to use other software were met by the beginning teacher receptively, but at this stage there was no movement towards using these resources. Smith and Alred (1994) reinforce that 'the training of teachers has to proceed by attending to whatever needs they have and not only considering what they ought to be able to do when they have finished their training.' At this point of training I had
to ask myself what this teacher needed and how best they could be supported. The idealism of not just looking at the ‘competencies’ that are needed when training is completed did in this case overlap with a need to help this beginning teacher in improving their delivery in the lessons being taught right then; however, the ‘real-world’ imminence of the start of a new job, without the structured time dedicated to mentoring that was on offer in the PGCE professional placements did afford a certain leverage to encourage this beginning teacher away from the ‘comfort-zone’ of routine that had crept into the use of ICT in the classroom.

The best approach seemed to be to make the discussion of ICT usage a more formal one and a scheduled mentor meeting became the environment for this. In this instance the Professional Tutor was also in attendance and with the evidence of numerous observations that mentioned ICT usage as an area for consideration, an agreement was reached that a specific training target for the following week would be to incorporate the use of the interactive whiteboard and its specific software into a lesson. This made the task approachable, measurable and gave it a timeframe for completion. Nevertheless, to merely set this target would have been like sending Telemachus off to acquire the ship, find his crew and then just wave him off from the shoreline as he sailed to Pylos. For this meeting a classroom with an interactive whiteboard was the venue and this was very deliberate. I had an electronic copy of the worksheet used with the Year 8 Latin class and this was displayed on the screen.

Each of the major concerns expressed above can be addressed within the word-processing software; toolbars can be hidden, pages displayed on page width modified, spelling and grammar checks turned off. However, one fundamental problem persists. It is very tough to annotate effectively a document in its raw word-processed format. Interactive whiteboards offer us a range of tools and the ability to draw links visually can be one of the most powerful tools that enable their use to add value. We examined a ‘quick-fix’ solution, the use of conversion to a portable download format (pdf). In this case Adobe software enabled such conversion, but the instant
benefits could be seen as within seconds a cluttered document appeared in a crisper screen presentation. The evidence can be seen in Figure 2. The impact of demonstrating this process and the ease with which it could be achieved opened a pathway for examination of the use of software specific to interactive whiteboards.

The next stage of demonstration involved leading the trainee into software that lies beyond the ‘comfort-zone’.

Software specifically designed for classroom use can be very powerful and has a vast number of options. It can be daunting as it does not behave in the manner of the standard ‘personal computer’ PC software that has dominated the market and provided the foundation for most people’s digital literacy. It is probably reasonable to suggest that there are numerous experienced teachers who have access to this software who do not use it to its full capability (or in many cases at all). My fear for this teacher was that there was a risk that a good understanding of such software would never be embedded if that opportunity was not taken at this early stage of teaching.

The software’s capability was able to be evaluated using a simple ‘copy and paste’ of the text. On initial examination, the pupil experience will appear little different to the pdf format, as can be seen in the screenshot Figure 3.

However, the true value of such software (in this case SMART Notebook) can be seen with some simple demonstration of the variety of tools available. Figure 4 is a rather extreme case but is a screenshot of how this resource looked after some annotation in the mentor meeting. With highlighters, coloured annotations and screen-shades all offering simple, accessible annotation opportunities, collective agreement was reached that the use of such software could enable the pupil experience to be ameliorated. This element was important as beginning teachers will, as Burn, Hagger, Mutton and Everton (2000) point out, move towards a focus on pupil outcome as their training period

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**GENITIVE PRACTICE SENTENCES**

1) Quintus villam Rufillae intravit.

2) principes ad aulum Cogidubni festinabant.

3) Bregans canem domini e villa duxit.

4) puella servum patris laudabat.

5) Britanni equos Romanorum spectabant.

6) ancillae per vias urbis cucurrunt urbi.
develops. The inclusion of offering the pupil experience in this meeting was important in detaching what just become comments on a feedback sheet in order to make them relevant and identifiable to a beginning teacher. If the benefit can be seen and a response to it can be prompted, then the use of such software can become the carrot offering the reward of pupil understanding and subsequent impact on learning, rather than the stick to be beaten with as the mentor just becomes a broken record moaning about ICT all the time.

What remained to be seen was how this beginning teacher would respond to the target that had been agreed. The outcome incorporated a starter activity for the same Year 8 class in which two lists were displayed, Latin words and their English translations jumbled to their right. The various functions (noun, verb in imperfect etc) were colour coded (enabling suitable differentiation for the class) and pupils were invited to join the words using the interactive whiteboard pens. This provided an opportunity for active participation that would have been much harder to achieve in any document of raw word-processed format. Figure 5 shows the appearance of the board after the pupils had offered responses.

This activity proved an excellent start to this lesson and the use of suitable software allowed the full capabilities of the hardware to add value to the learning experience of the pupils. Within this lesson, the follow-up task (Figure 6) involved the display of some Latin sentences on which pupils were asked to highlight different types of word in different colours (e.g. genitives, verbs in perfect).

This formatting change, though simple, enabled further active participation by students and the beginning teacher was able to reflect at the end of the lesson that as well as achieving the specific training target, it was evident that the use of such software and hardware had enabled a more dynamic lesson to develop, with numerous assessment opportunities incorporated within it. Nonetheless there were further opportunities for discussion and reflection after the lesson. Given the colour coding that was in place, there had been an opportunity to further differentiate if necessary, by using the colours of the pens that matched the colours of the words being matched. For example a pupil could have been issued the green pen and asked to join a verb in the imperfect (typed in green) with its meaning (also typed in green), linking them with a line that matched their colour for greater visual reinforcement. There was also scope for ‘drag and drop’ exercises: if each meaning had been typed in separately as an individual text box, then the meaning could simply be dragged across to match its Latin partner. Subsequently such tasks were employed by this teacher and it was apparent that opening the dialogue and modelling the capabilities of the software and hardware had impacted positively on the training and development of this beginning teacher.

Sometimes patience and very specific guidance are needed for a mentor to break down a barrier that is not easy to erode. However, certain factors helped to enable an improvement in classroom-based digital literacy. By relating this concern to the realities of success in the beginning teacher’s next job and by emphasising the problems of never breaking habits, enough leverage was available to ensure that significant progress could be made by the beginning teacher, who went on to make accomplished use of available ICT in the classroom.

In concluding, it is important to emphasise that this case study is meant merely to offer an example of how digital literacy in the classroom can benefit the experience of both beginning teachers and their pupils. I am in no way advocating any single piece of software above any other; all will offer their own benefit and purpose. The most vital element of digital literacy in a classroom environment remains to use the most appropriate software for any given task. In order to achieve this, it is imperative that we can provide suitable training in the use of the software that is available and to model its use for beginning teachers.

This remains just one case study in an ever-evolving part of the teaching world; beginning teachers and those mentoring them will face huge challenges as the onslaught of technology blends in with teaching and learning. In this case the beginning teacher was offered a framework to then experiment further independently. Such instances remain an indication that that, with persistence, the small differences between good performance and potentially outstanding performance can be engineered through careful mentoring. We do not all need to have the divine wisdom of Athene to offer the guiding hand of Mentor, but we must be realistic in our expectation of digital literacy among those entering the profession. It is one thing to have the tools but quite another to have the craftsmanship. Digital media will undoubtedly continue to play a huge role in the teaching of Classics. It is therefore vital to encourage its effective use and all those working with beginning teachers will be doing the teaching and learning of Classics a service if we can encourage each Telemachus we encounter to make effective use of ICT in their teaching from the outset.

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References


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References


1The Professional Tutor is name given by this particular teacher-training course to the teacher in the school who is responsible for overseeing the training programme of new staff.