

**The educational MOLT: a natural process
facilitating the gradual replacement of tattered,
or damaged feathers with new feather growth**

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The educational MOLT: a natural process facilitating the gradual replacement of tattered, or damaged feathers with new feather growth

www.wlv.ac.uk/molt

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[The report below is a synopsis of a much longer document. For further details, please contact the authors]

Background and rationale

Do your learners seem to know a lot about the intricacies of East Enders, Corry or Home and Away? Do they seem fascinated with the lives, work and family of the Beckhams, the Blairs and the Browns? Your learners are probably also keen to study the modules and courses you run, but what if it were possible to take: everyday curiosity, intrigue, characterization, narrative, and key areas of your academic subject; and then, package them within an environment that fires the imagination, meets your and their needs, and also helps you and your learners to grow? We've created such an environment, and called it The MOLT - a fictional, Multi-media On-Line Town, to enhance the educational experience of learners (and educators) on both the Common Foundation Program of the Registered Nurse/DipHE and the Diploma in Social Work.

The Educational MOLT is an innovative, accessible, on-line, learning and teaching environment which takes a wide range of learners 'one step closer to practice'. At present, the main part of the MOLT is a virtual town called New Molton. Within this town are several characters, who live a virtual life in it. Educators write learning materials, which use aspects of the characters' experiences to offer contextualized and expansive learning opportunities which facilitate learning. The learning materials may be used, re-used, and added to, by a wide range of learners and educators in diverse ways at many different levels. However, for many reasons such as those cited by Singh (2002) the MOLT is definitely NOT a replacement for face to face contact and interaction.

The first 3 authors listed above, work with learners on a variety of courses in Health, Nursing and Social Work education. The last named author is a courseware development specialist. The Academic Schools we belong to, teach and assess learners in many different ways and we are continuously attempting to improve our practice in these areas. There is a wide range of exciting teaching and learning practice within our Schools but this practice, and the energy it creates, is often not exploited to its fullest potential, as it was created and utilised, in isolation at the modular, or even at session level.

Fundamentally, the MOLT innovation has its origins in our teaching and learning practice. For example, we regularly ask ourselves questions like: how can we help students to learn? Who is a learner? How do they learn? We also, bring into our awareness, and try to work with, general educational issues and tensions around: embracing diversity, whilst searching for commonality of understanding in the classroom; different types of theory, evidence and practice; thinking and working with an emphasis on holism, whilst tangling with the reductionism inherent in modularity; the accessibility of resources, learning opportunities and the curriculum.

Specific to our disciplines and professions we are also concerned to promote multi-professional (and multi-agency) teaching, learning and working. Indeed, current government policy (for example, DoH 2000) reminds us of the priorities they place on multi-professional education and team working across organizational boundaries. We also try to ensure our learners have access to high quality practice placements while at the same time, also ensuring that we (and they) address issues around learners practi(s)cing on clients and service users.

Alongside this, we are also aware of the need to find ways of modelling notions of 'best' practice while also providing opportunities for learners and practitioners to untangle problematic practices. In other words, we have a desire to take account of, and work with a deep understanding of, the multi-faceted nature of nursing and social work (Rystedt and Lindstrom, 2001).

The innovation – The educational MOLT

The objectives of our project were to: establish a joint RN/DipHE - DipSW Working Group; explore the relevant literature; identify, and work within, the current limitations of the IT infrastructure; develop the on-line materials; disseminate ideas for use of MOLT; identify and operationalise one use (of MOLT); identify and plan for at least two other uses; evaluate staff and students perceptions of MOLT. We have met these objectives.



Figure 1. Home page of MOLT

This page offers 3 options: to enter the fictional town itself - New Molton; to read about the background to the MOLT; or to share ideas about using the MOLT in your learning and teaching.

If you choose to enter the virtual town of New Molton, you'll notice that the first page has the feel of a tourist information site (Figure 2). This is our first town within the MOLT and it is based on a composite sense of many towns in the Midlands. We envisage subsequently adding rural areas and cities as requested.

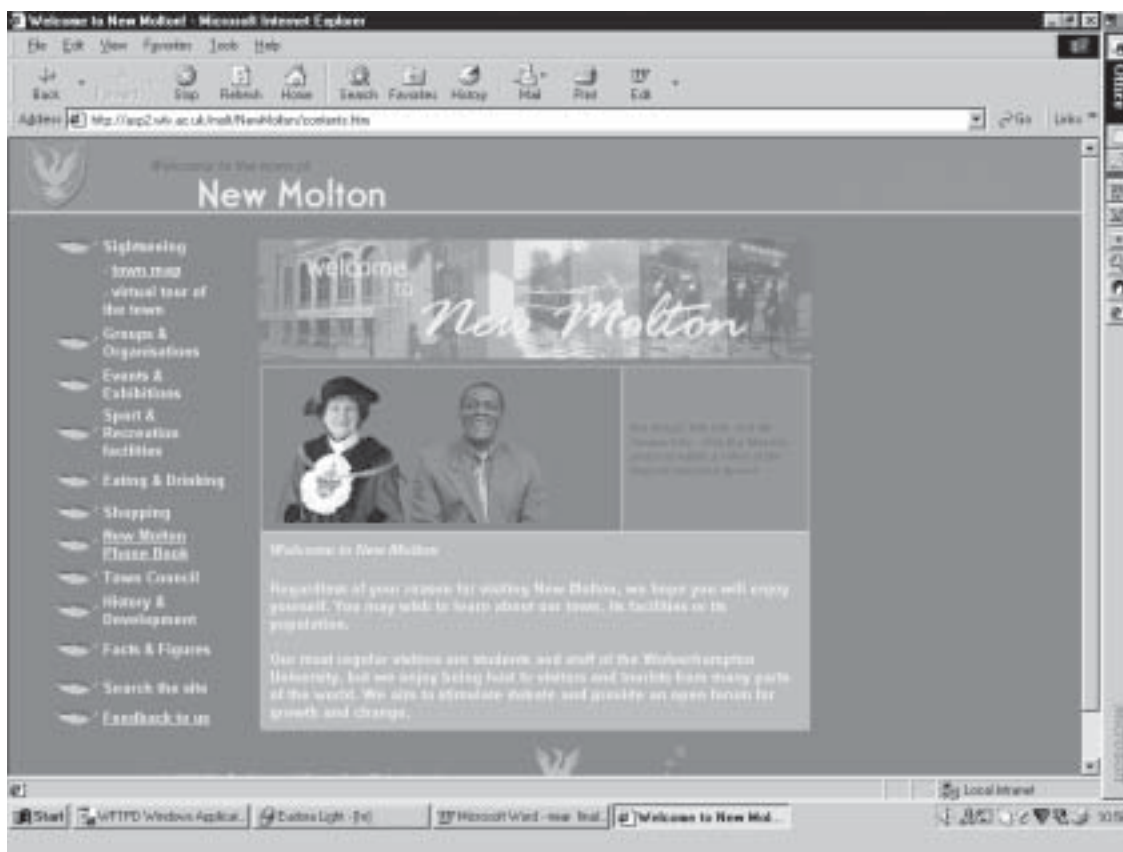


Figure 2.

The town has a Mayor. It also has the basis of a wide range of town facilities and services. At the moment, the main ways of navigating the site are via the town map and the phone book. If you use the former, you will have the chance to gain an overall sense of the town's layout and structure, you may then work your way through the town towards the virtual home or workplace of any of the characters. Whereas, if you use the latter phone book, you will go straight into the home page of a character. It is from these home pages that you will gain access to a wide range of links surrounding that character, such as, to: artefacts, a genogram, the doctors surgery, a day centre, etc. Subsequently we hope to introduce use of a keyword search on the site.

What if you could use a current town character, or create a new character, institution or agency, that could help both you and your learners? Maybe characters (or narrative within the town) could engage in the activities and changes you or your learners currently find it difficult to work with? Perhaps observing or working through the application of complex theory and evidence will assist students towards that eureka moment for themselves? Perhaps you run modules that the same learners will access at different levels. Use of characters and narrative could provide both you and your learners with tools to facilitate continuity of understanding and to then also facilitate the negotiation of increasing complexity?

Working with Social Work learners, lecturers support students in exploring such issues as: confidentiality, assumptions and stereo-typing, the power of professional groups of workers, and finally, the constructs of notions such as “over-protection” and “separation anxiety”. To facilitate that group of learners, one author wrote this set of characters and the associated narrative to (Figure 3): <http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/molt/NewMolton/oloos/oloos.htm>.

On the RN/DipHE, we have subsequently used the same materials as a basis to help our learners consider those same areas. But, they are also concerned to identify the signs and symptoms of meningitis, the nursing care that should be provided for a small child with a chest infection and many other issues. This exemplifies how the same materials, located within the MOLT, may provide learning opportunities for several groups of learners.

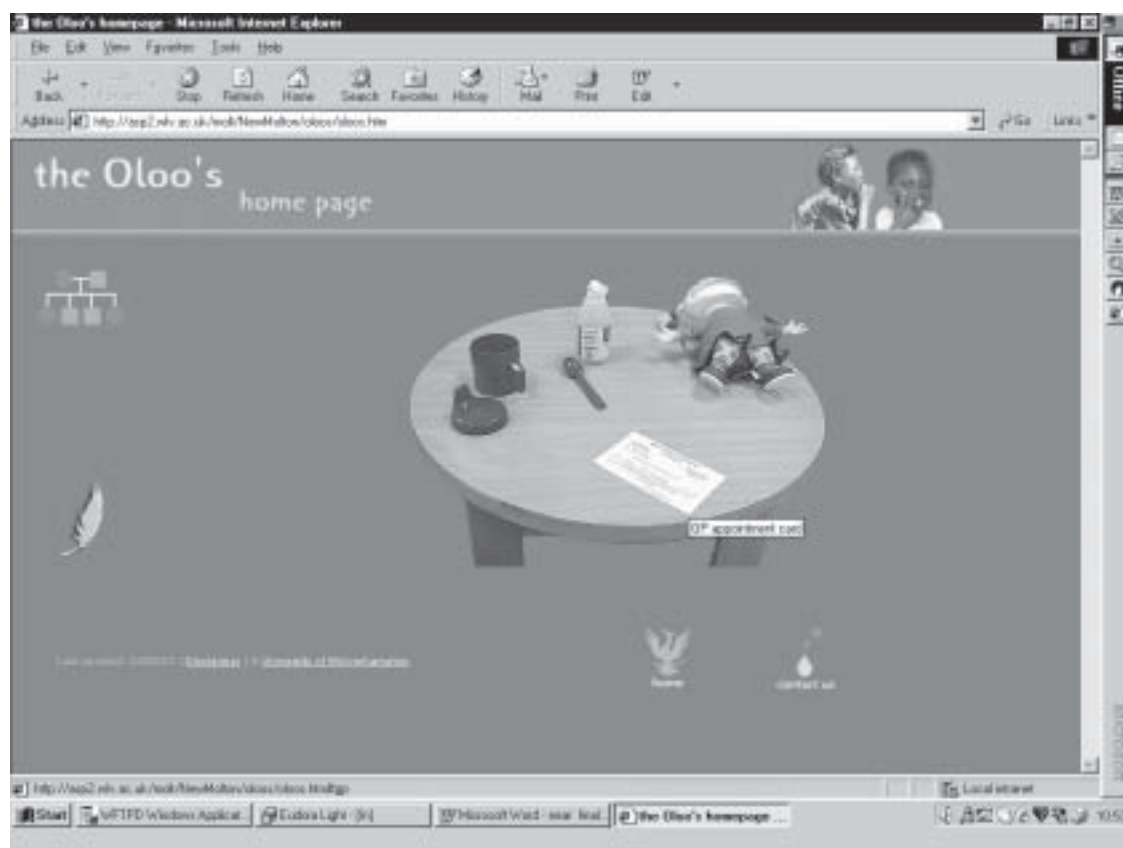


Figure 3.

Simply considering this one group of characters, it is possible that you may now be able to imagine the learning opportunities on offer within the MOLT. If you are a micro-biologist would you like to write some materials around the meningitis or chest infection threads of the narrative? Could you create a laboratory? If you are a pharmacist what about looking in some depth at some of the medications mentioned here. A sociologist may use this case study to assist students to explore material on professional power, and a surveyor may want to isolate the cracks in the walls of the Oloo’s kitchen. A lawyer may want to write materials around professional negligence and a teacher educator may want to look in some depth at the context within which this 3yr old child is trying to learn about the world.

The MOLT will move further towards its potential when it contains materials written by a very wide range of educators, and is used by them, and a very wide range of learners. If you’d like to make changes to a particular family, then the original authors will discuss those with you. If it would help you and your learners for you to write a new character or a bigger area of the MOLT then you could contact any of the MOLT Production Team today via the form on the site. <http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/molt/NewMolton/contactus.htm>.

It is also worth reiterating that we'd welcome any form of contribution from anyone who'd like to be an educator. For example, perhaps a General Practitioner would like to create a piece which considers how difficult it is to make a diagnosis of meningitis? Perhaps a member of an organisation, which supports women who have experienced the death of a young child, may like to write an account of this from Yvonne Oloo's perspective?

Part of our innovation has been to recognise the operational necessity of a supportive infrastructure for such e-learning environments. This helps to ensure that our shared practice enriches both you, and your learners, experience of work.

The middle section of the home page consists of the background papers that underpin the MOLT's development.

The outcomes

Anticipated outcomes, as a consequence of joint writing and ownership of MOLT were that:

Anticipated outcome	Actual outcomes
<p>1. Pre-registration nursing and social work teaching staff would have access to a versatile, dynamic on-line teaching resource.</p>	<p><i>Accessibility and versatility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have ensured that this site is completely open access on the world wide web. Thus, anyone who wants to use the environment may make use of the learning opportunities it provides. • Likewise, anyone who wishes to be an educator may do so. Minor changes to the town involve little time or creativity and may be made within hours of a request being made. • Major character creations may incur costs. But, if the material is useful for both Nursing and Social Work students then these will be minimal.
<p>2. We will have increased opportunities for integrated use of Problem Based Learning, experiential learning and simulations.</p>	<p><i>Use of PBL, experiential learning and simulations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone wishing to use PBL may use any aspect of the MOLT as the basis of a problem or enigma. • We consider that the MOLT takes students "one step closer to practice". • Simulations of practice situations are easily created using the available media and academic based expertise. • The MOLT facilitates application of theory to practice and it facilitates reflection on theory when in practice learning.

3. One such use of the environment would have been identified, operationalised and evaluated.	<p><i>Operationalisation and evaluation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately 250 Level 1 nursing learners used the MOLT as the basis of PBL enigmas. Both educators and learners evaluated the MOLT very favorably (Appendix).
4. Collaborative links between foundation nursing and foundation social work staff would be developed.	<p><i>Collaboration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The MOLT production team work closely together. An example of this is that we have supported each other to present the MOLT to various audiences. Our Health Visitor team member has assisted in a presentation at the Social Work Practice Teacher conference and our Social Worker has contributed both to a presentation to the Department of Health and also in the School of Health at Nottingham University.

These outcomes have been met in full. Indeed, one of the main challenges faced by the team and both Schools now, is how to manage the demands placed on the team by its success. Many academic members of staff appear to want to engage with the MOLT, at least 2 other major external organizations have planned activities in order to create materials, and we have been awarded the School of Health's embedding funding for 2003/4.

Benefits

We would like to argue that the MOLT has the following benefits for the following groups. From our evaluation, it appears that our current users consider it does have many of these. However, we appreciate these claims should be subject to considerable scrutiny and are currently identifying research funding opportunities in order to do so.

If you are a learner the MOLT can:	If you are an educator the MOLT can:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> offer you a new, varied, exciting environment in which to learn foster a climate in which you want to reflect on your learning be available to you anytime, anyplace, anywhere, you can access the www encourage you to be more independent as a learner and also enable you to return to learning activities when you need to bring modules, experiences and case studies to life further increase your curiosity for your subject allow you to share your learning environment with people studying for many different reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> help you to engage your learners and encourage them to be more independent enhance your working relationships with other educators increase your opportunities for multi-professional, multi-agency working provide you with a versatile, dynamic, interesting environment in which to help learners make sense of complex ideas and experiences promote a more "joined-up" and systems approach to our thinking help you create a shared sense of the world to use as a basis for learning add an extra, intriguing method to the ways you deliver material

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage you to assess the various contexts within which we live, learn and work • help you keep up to date with new evidence and changes in practice • create opportunities for you to bring relevant material into class, your assessed work, or care situations: provide a “safe” environment in which you can consider, and work in, simulated situations • take you one step closer to putting theory into practice • offer you the chance to contribute to the learning of others • assist you to have on-line conversations with others, including with the various educators • (apparently) become quite addictive. Our current learners love following the characters stories and experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help you to make use of technology to support your teaching and learning • provide an extra opportunity for learners to learn outside formal teaching spaces • offer you a chance to change the nature of interactions with learners • assist you to build reflection into your learning materials • help you use your time in satisfying ways • be an opportunity for you to create new teaching and learning resources with expert support and guidance from the Town Guardian and the Sparks.
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We consider that other benefits include, those to:

- *The quality of our teaching provision:* we have created, an environment that promotes active learning and facilitates the learning process (Staley and Mackenzie 2001). Other teaching staff, now have access to an environment that is dynamic and responsive to their needs and ideas.
- *The quality of the learning experience:* because we have further positioned the learner at the center of our teaching and learning. Thus, we have moved away from the notion that “all students need”, via the creation of an on-line “environment that provides individualized learning approaches that serve each person in ways that he or she can most benefit” Twigg (2002, p9).
- *The efficacy and efficiency of our programs:* because learners have access to a well designed environment in which they will be facilitated to integrate different types of relevant empirical knowledge, theory and practice.
- *Nursing and social work practice:* because simulations of “real world” experiences, where students work together to develop a range of knowledge and skills are considered to be a step closer to “putting theory into practice” (Honey and Mumford 1989). Also, future collaborations between these professional staff groups have been facilitated.

Future developments

For the MOLT Project: the team have recently been awarded the School of Health’s ‘Embedding Funding’. This gives us the opportunity to ensure the longevity and productivity of our innovation and action within the University, and also within the HE Sector.

For the MOLT Production Team: the current team are in the process of reflecting upon their experiences of this project and of their need for professional development.

For the MOLT platform: the MOLT now has a reasonably sound operational basis, and changes are made to it every day. We now aim to ensure that requests for subsequent change are responded to efficiently and effectively. A document that currently guides our practice may be found at the following link <http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/molt/Learn/doh.pdf>.

Within nursing and social work courses: learners on these courses will be further exposed to the MOLT. This exposure, is being facilitated, by a range of personnel, including: academics, practice teachers, clinicians and clients. Planned use is at academic levels 1,2 and 3.

Within other courses at the University of Wolverhampton: where the MOLT team have already been approached, with ideas, by academics from the Law School, Sport and Performing Arts.

Research into use of the MOLT: we actively welcome, and will support, any researcher who would like to undertake research into use of the MOLT. The team is also currently pursuing funding opportunities. Indeed, if as a consequence of reading this paper you have a sense of opportunity or critique we'd like to hear from you.

Contacts

Please feed back your thoughts and ideas to the Production Team, via the forms on the site.

<http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/molt/NewMolton/contactus.htm>

<http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/molt/Learn/feedback-learn.htm>

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