Wins and hurdles: The ups and downs in providing professional development in elearning

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Strategically aligning staff development to facilitate exploration and innovation in the application of learning technologies is a complex balancing act that integrates the influences of technological change, shifting institutional priorities and conditions, and uneven uptake among staff.

In this paper we focus on (one aspect of) a multi pronged staff development strategy in a university context. As an evidence base, we draw on staff participation and evaluation data for an 18 month period to explore some of the factors that have contributed to how the professional development (PD) program has evolved in response to local conditions while deploying good practice guidelines. Quantitative and qualitative data from staff surveys are analysed to determine the impact and effectiveness of the program and to explore the factors that have influenced the evolution of the program.

Keywords: elearning, professional development, training.

Introduction

Leadership development that contributes to the advancement of teaching and learning is the overarching goal of professional development (PD) within higher education. The many subsets, including elearning development that feed into this goal, demonstrate the complexity that characterises this area. The ways in which PD is delivered and the evaluation of its effectiveness is driven by the specific purposes within local environments. Of relevance to the present work are three purposes of PD, namely orienting new staff to the academic culture embedded in the institution's elearning portfolio, developing discrete skills to deploy learning technologies appropriately, and professionalising eteaching by developing good practice. In this paper we discuss an elearning PD program at a West Australian university and analyse the findings from our evaluation.

Background

Curtin has been providing distance education courses for more than 40 years and has been offering online programs since 1998. Until 2007, responsibility for professional development was split between the administrators of the learning management systems, who focused on effective use of the technology, and the Office of Teaching and Learning whose primary focus was on the PD of academic staff conducting face-to-face teaching.

The Centre for eLearning was established in 2007 and it brought together business management of learning technologies as well as instructional design and e-learning. At the same time Curtin began moving from five learning management systems to a single system for the whole university. The decision to migrate three of the four Faculties from WebCT to Blackboard meant that the Centre needed to develop a PD program that facilitated the migration process, addressed the rapid expansion of units being offered online through Curtin and Open Universities Australia (OUA) and introduced teaching staff to online communication and collaboration strategies to engage students.

Commencing in 2009 the PD program included:

- A weekly program of eight short workshops that covered the key teaching and administrative functions of Blackboard;
- A module on e-learning in Curtin's Foundations of Learning and Teaching program;
- The development of a comprehensive website that included tip sheets and videos on all aspects of online teaching and learning; and
- Regular newsletters to staff on effective use of learning technologies.

In 2010 this was supplemented by regularly scheduled drop in sessions using Elluminate *Live!* virtual classroom and additional workshops on Campus Pack blogs, wikis, journals and podcasts which focused primarily on teaching strategies afforded by the social media technologies.

Whilst the provision of PD is addressed using multiple strategies, workshops are widely considered as offering a cost effective approach (Doherty, 2011; Prebble, et al. 2004; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Workshops are also an effective means for creating staff awareness of new technologies and for facilitating change in teaching practices in blended environments (Sharpe, Benfield, & Francis, 2006), hence the workshop program has been adopted as the Centre's primary elearning PD strategy.

The elearning professional development workshop program

Over an 18 month period, 226 workshops generated a total attendance of 1139 **(**consisting of 658 individual staff members, many of whom attended multiple workshops). Eight workshops were offered weekly throughout the semester and these were promoted via global email to staff, on the Centre's website http://cel.curtin.edu.au/professional_development/ and via a Twitter account. An online registration system enabled staff to schedule and book workshops. Two staff members facilitated every workshop, one leading the session and the other assisting, interacting and problem solving. Twelve or more topics were addressed within each workshop program, covering standard Blackboard training as well as additional topics focused on new learning technologies, technology upgrades, strategic projects, and special requests from schools and departments. All instructors (6 eLearning Advisors and two LMS managers) contributed to the development of the workshop programs and additional training resources are made accessible via the website. Standardised Blackboard training units (and accounts) are created for workshop participants to login to and practice without fear of making mistakes or deleting real documents from their own Blackboard units.

Methods

The approach adopted was driven by our aims to provide an effective ongoing PD workshop program based on good practice principles; and to be responsive to immediate and future needs of staff. To achieve these aims we adopted a design based research approach which allowed us the scope to explore how aspects of our educational design impacted on participants' learning experiences in the workshop setting through a cyclical development process, coherent implementation strategies, followed by a systematic evaluation process (Reeves, 2006; Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010).

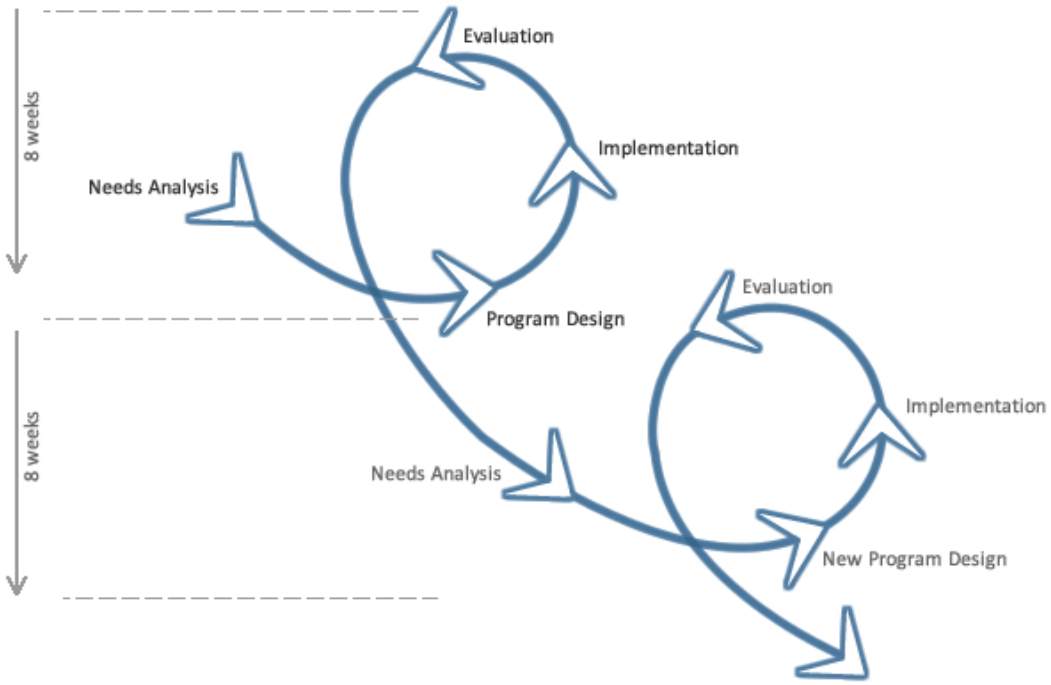

Figure 1: The design based research process applied during the development of this program

The data collection occurred over an 18 month period (2010 / 2011). A pre-course needs analysis was conducted to guide workshop planning and development. This online survey included fixed alternative type questions to elicit staff feedback on best times to run PD, how long the sessions should be, and the topics that staff thought would be most useful. An open ended question was incorporated to elicit additional information about specific needs and areas of interest. The data received informed initial program development.

A post-course evaluation was implemented at the end of each semester. The survey questionnaire consisted of nine items. In line with the principles of design based research methodology, the post-workshop evaluation survey was slightly modified in the second evaluation cycle as we wanted to update our workshop offerings and gather feedback on new sessions that staff would be interested in. In addition to the online survey, we also sought direction through reflective knowledge. As a collective, we reflected *in* action and *on* action (Gibbs, 1988; Schon, 1987), making mental notes of what worked and what didn't within particular workshops. This information was captured during PD planning meetings held at the conclusion of each cycle of workshops.

In this paper we report on the results of our overall evaluation and analyse the data in terms of the gains and hurdles that have impacted upon the elearning PD workshops, and consider possible implications for future work. This is done within a broader framework of good practice principles reflected in current literature.

Good practice principles

There is an abundance of literature on effective staff professional development practices, focused on both generic and context specific settings and strategies. Essentially five areas were targeted, namely development of elearning pedagogy; technological awareness and skills; accessibility, collective and active participation; and coherence (perceptions of usefulness, capacity to address immediate needs, types of activities, duration of the sessions, and available support).

Within an elearning PD context, it is critical to develop participants' understanding of how to teach online. Desimone (2009), Alexander (2001), and Garet, Porter, Desimone and Birman (2001), found that a dual focus on subject content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge has a significant positive impact on teachers' self-reported increases in knowledge and skills and changes in classroom practice. Rourke et al. (1999) and Doherty,

Blake and Cooper (2009) give further strength to the importance of establishing cognitive and teaching presence within elearning environments. Blank, de las Alas, and Smith (2007) add that PD content should specifically address identified weaknesses or needs of staff.

Technological awareness and skills among staff is imperative for effective elearning implementation, continuing development and ongoing management. Alexander (2001) and Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen and Garet (2008) emphasise the importance of recognising and appropriately addressing the level of participants' technological skills including the need to promote new ideas about using educational technologies appropriately. Alexander cautions that teachers' conceptions of learning strongly influences course planning, teaching strategies and what students learn, and PD initiatives should address this. Thus, a balance between technological and pedagogical skills is advocated.

Enhancing the accessibility of professional development opportunities is a critical component in facilitating development within local settings. Garet et al. (2009), and Desimone (2009), suggest that the type and duration of PD activities affect teacher learning. Well resourced, activity driven authentic learning sessions, that require a realistic time investment by increasingly time poor academic staff offers a viable solution.

Collective and active participation strengthens motivation and authentic engagement in a learning environment, as such workshops are likely to promote collegial support as well. Along these lines, several writers have shown that facilitation of learning communities can act as levers for elearning development with regard to knowledge, skills and classroom practice (Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2009; Sharpe, Benfield and Francis; 2006). Desimone et al. (2002) noted that giving participants opportunities to talk, think, try out and hone new practices facilitate increases in knowledge and skills, and changes in teaching practices, which includes encouraging participants to voice their opinions and challenge their beliefs about elearning (Richardson, 2003; Sharpe, et al.).

The coherence of a PD program relates to how the program goals and its implementation are aligned with the identified and evolving needs of staff within a dynamic environment. Blank, de las Alas, and Smith (2007) suggested that PD should be relevant to the day-to-day teaching and learning operations and university policies to achieve improvements and sustainable teaching practices (Grant, Peterson, & Shojgren-Downer, 1996). Experiential aspects significantly influence participants knowledge and skills development and their use of the relevant tools (Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2009; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi and Gallagher, 2007). Multiple factors contribute to the experiential component of PD, including collegiality (Richardson, 2003), social presence (Doherty, 2011; Rourke et al., 1999), type of activity and duration of the activity (Desimone, Garet et al.), and the capacity to meet immediate needs (Rourke et al.). Support and follow up activities are crucial to promote deeper understanding and extend practice of newly learned skills (Garet et al.; Richardson).

The ideas discussed in this section provided a pedagogical foundation for the workshops.

Results

The post workshop evaluation results provided data on attendance, participants' satisfaction rating of workshops attended, overall coherence of workshops attended, time preferences, topics of interest for future workshops, and suggestions for improvements. We received a response rate of 12.31% (n = 81), which provides a snapshot of attitudes and needs, but the limited sample size requires a cautious approach to interpreting the data and generalising findings to the population as a whole. Although workshops were offered regularly during semester, the collection of staff feedback only occurred at the end of each semester, usually when many staff were on leave. A possible factor contributing to the less than satisfactory response rate is the time delay between workshop attendance and implementation of the survey. In addition, the 'over surveying' of university staff is discouraged and many staff are in fact reluctant to complete **any** survey. Again, the hurdle of academic workload possibly impacted on both attendance at the workshops and the provision of feedback regarding the workshops.

Over the 18 month period 226 workshops were attended by 658 individual staff, although the total attendance was 1139 as many staff attended more than one workshop. This figure (658) represents 18% of the total Curtin staff population of 3500 (Curtin Annual Report, 2010), keeping in mind that not all staff have a teaching responsibility and so workshops in these areas would hold no interest for them. On average 75% of bookings resulted in actual attendance. Attendance data suggests that whilst reach was reasonably good, participation in

the evaluation process was less satisfactory.

An interesting finding was that in 2010, 17% of workshop attendees were from the general staff pool, as opposed to academic or teaching staff. In 2011, this number increased to 24%. The demographics of these general staff members indicate an increased uptake in training by many support areas, such as Student Support, the Library and Careers Office. The application of elearning and web 2.0 technologies is no longer restricted to the academic domain; with many general staff members finding innovative ways to incorporate these tools and techniques into their non-academic roles.

Five of the ten workshops offered attracted the most attendance. The workshops with higher attendance, as shown in Figure 2, were offered more frequently in order to address staff needs.

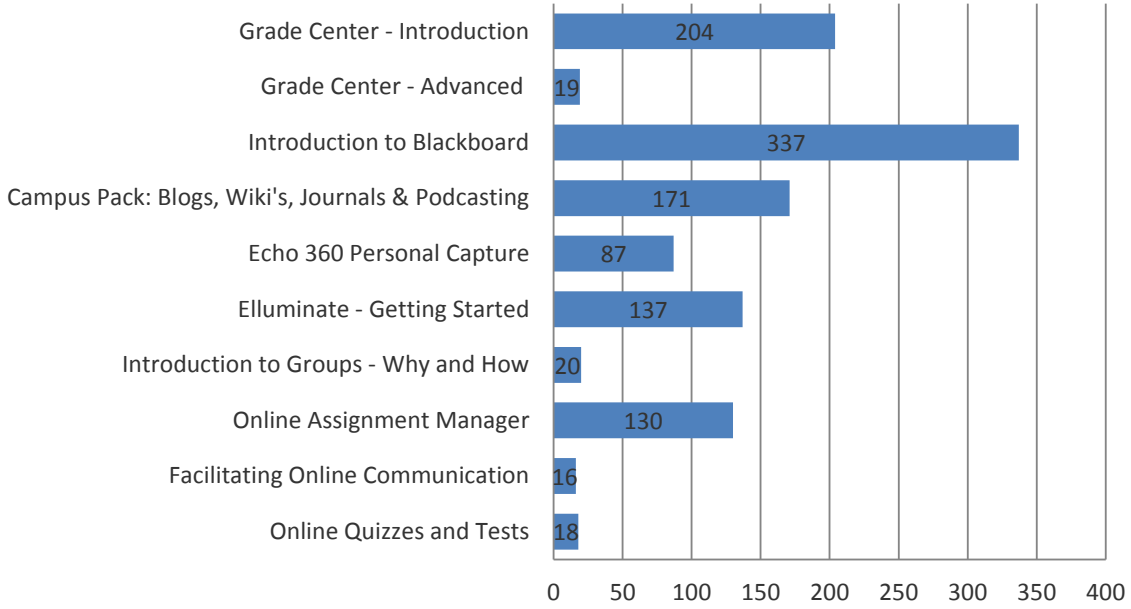

Figure 2: Number of attendees for individual workshops (n = 1139).

Respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction with all workshops that were offered, as shown in Figure 3. Favourable levels of satisfaction were found with ratings in the good/ very good range falling between 50-100%. Contrastingly, a small number of respondents rated three workshops as poor/ very poor; this rating was limited to 0 - 7% of the overall satisfaction for the relevant workshops. An 'average' rating was returned by some respondents for all but one workshop; this number varied between 5-50%.

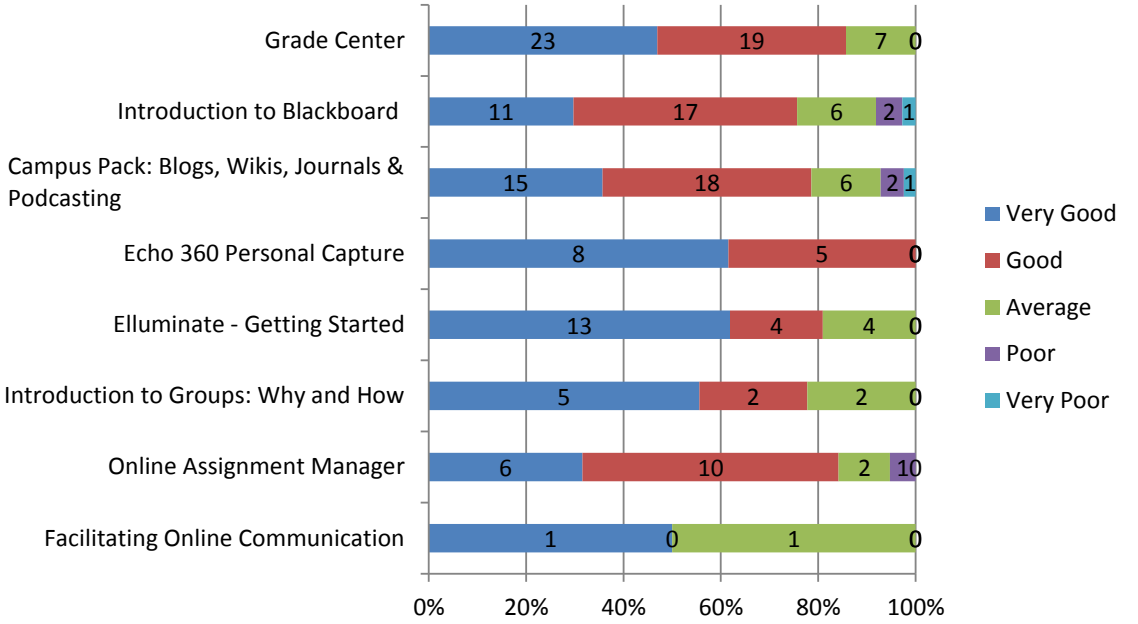

Figure 3: Satisfaction level with workshops attended.

To assess staff satisfaction with the level of support provided within the workshops two questions addressed whether participant questions were answered and needs were met. Ninety percent of respondents agreed / strongly agreed with these statements, suggesting that their learning was supported in the workshops. Five –ten percent of respondents submitted a response of disagree /strongly disagree, while 5-10% returned a neutral response.

Similarly, staff perception about the incorporation of elearning pedagogy was very favourable. Seventy eight percent of respondents agreed / strongly agreed that the educational benefits of the technology were explained. Two percent of respondents submitted a disagree response while 10% returned a neutral response. No strongly disagree responses were recorded.

Workshop coherence was evaluated in terms of two indicators - pace and structure, both of which yielded very positive results as shown in Figure 4. Between 78-80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the pace and structure of the workshops they attended was appropriate for them. Respondents that disagreed or strongly disagreed on these indicators of workshop coherence again was limited to below 10%, with between 8-12% returning a neutral response.

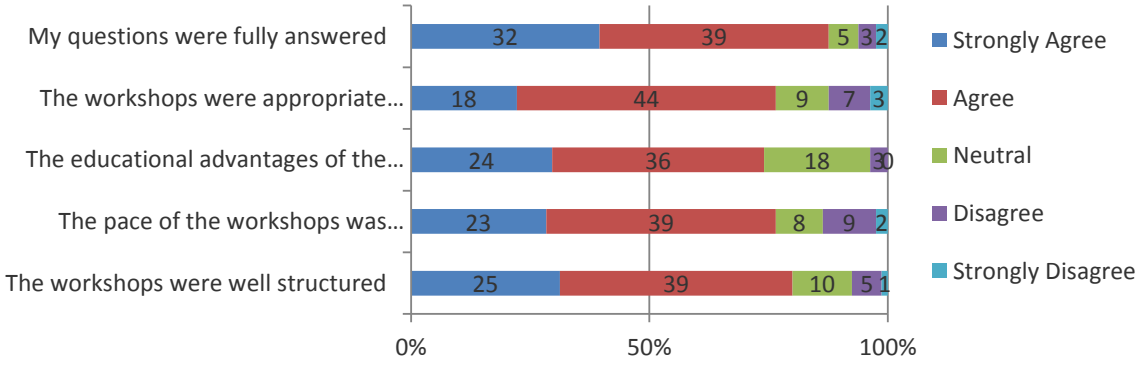

Figure 4: Satisfaction with support, epedagogy and coherence

Exploration of preferred times for workshops produced highly varied responses as shown in Figure 5. Sixty

seven percent of respondents indicated a preference to attend workshops prior to the start of semester, during tuition free weeks, or during the semester breaks. However, given the spread of responses, no clear preferences could be determined other than scheduling in non-teaching periods.

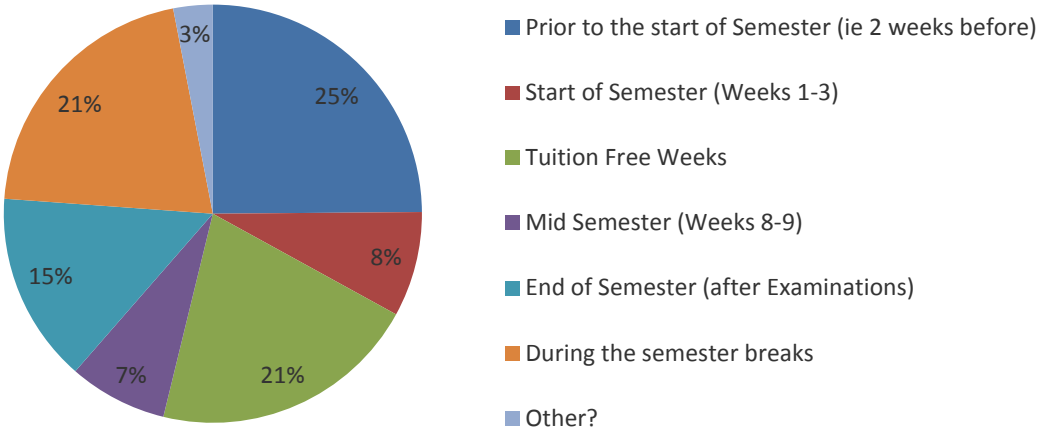

Figure 5: Preferred times for workshops

To guide future planning respondents were asked which workshops they were most interested in attending. Six new topics (highlighted in green) were added to the original offerings; the responses are presented in Figure 6. Apart from obvious interest in 'Quizzes and Tests', 'Grade Center Advanced', Elluminate (Getting Started)', and 'Campus Pack (Podcasting)' no prominent areas of interest were identified.

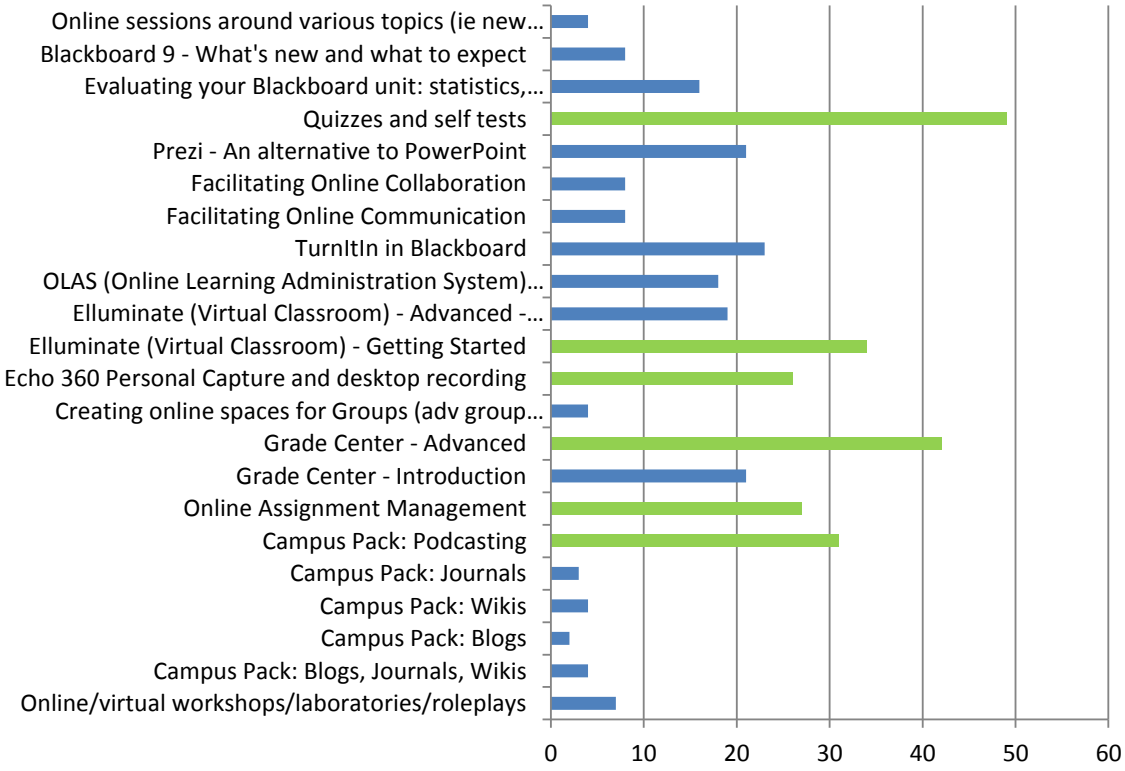

Figure 6: Topics of interest for future workshops

Further suggestions were invited through an open ended question. Nine respondents supplied feedback that pointed to their interest in being introduced to a wider range of tools (e.g. video editing), receiving training to

optimize their use of advanced functionality within Blackboard (Assignment Manager, Grade Center, Group Management) and training to enhance their use of the Microsoft Office suite and the Curtin iPortfolio system. An interesting thread that was present in several responses was the request to guide staff in developing effective epedagogy practices and facilitate their adoption of innovative elearning strategies.

Discussion

The results show that the expanded PD workshop program has positively generated interest and participation resulting in 18% of all staff having attended these centrally offered workshops. We consider this a good outcome given that many staff also access elearning support available within faculties and schools. However, there remains an ongoing challenge to increase workshop attendance, particularly among new staff and those entering elearning. A further issue is the uneven attendance pattern across offerings. Predictably, the workshops focused on basic LMS functionality are very well attended whereas those focused on more advanced aspects are less so. This pattern is also true for elearning development across the institution, and remains a strategic challenge for those responsible for PD. Whilst managing the issue of non attendance (following a booking) is not a high priority at this stage, it is an area to be considered in the near future since much effort is put into tailoring workshops to meet the anticipated needs of those who have enrolled, which has implications for efficient workload management.

The high levels of overall satisfaction and satisfaction with pace and structure are acknowledged gains in terms of our learning design and delivery style as well as the contribution to bring about strategic shifts in how staff conceptualise elearning. Given the diversity of the attendee cohort (e.g. large number of sessionals, an increasing number of general staff, and a combination of experienced elearning practitioners and novices), designing workshops that cater to individual needs is an issue that has to be negotiated within each workshop, which is often exacerbated within the confines of the standard one hour duration within which we integrate instruction in epedagogy, active learning using technology, and participant dialogue (teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence). Having two facilitators (one leading and the other supporting and assisting) mitigates these issues significantly. However, whilst the diversity, group dynamics and approach to PD facilitation adopted are positive aspects (wins), the timeframe is sometimes a constraining factor and can be a double edged sword (a hurdle). The one hour duration for workshops is suited to staff availability but often means that workshop aims need to be narrowly focused posing a challenge to embrace good practice guidelines of creating scope to build deeper understanding accompanied by opportunities for hands on practice (Garet et al., 2009; Rourke, et al., 2009). Despite this perceived challenge staff felt highly supported within the PD environment and that their individual needs were met.

Whilst 171 staff participated in the 'Campus Pack' workshops, the individual workshops averaged less than 50% attendance. More than 300 units have implemented Campus Pack blogs and/or wikis and they are being used primarily in units with high student enrolment. Workshop attendees have therefore been focussed on issues associated with implementing the tools rather than the learning activities afforded by the tools. This aligns with our statistics that show non-basic workshops have lower attendance rates.

The development, implementation, and review processes have been invaluable in identifying areas for ongoing improvement and have enabled a short cycle of change, which has ensured that our PD offerings are responsive to identified needs and emergent issues as they arise. The latter is particularly important within an organisational climate where technology upgrades are frequent. An associated challenge is the need to manage collaborative and cooperative relationships with multiple teams including the technical support team on campus and support staff at Blackboard, Campus Pack and Elluminate. All upgrades result in up skilling workshop staff, redevelopment of training materials and updating workshops, which also means that future proofing workshops is an ongoing balancing act to ensure resources and materials reflect most recent upgrades.

Scheduling of workshops is a challenging area as it is increasingly difficult to identify a common period that is suitable to most staff. This is related to the high proportion of staff not actually based on campus, staff not being remunerated for attending elearning PD, and the simultaneous scheduling of multiple study periods which now means that there is no period during the year when units are not being taught. In light of these hurdles, our approach is to schedule an intensive workshop program in the weeks prior to and at the start of semester, and to continue to offer a reduced number of workshops during the semester; this appears to be working satisfactorily so far.

In terms of coordinating future planning to complement staff interests / needs on the one hand and institution wide directions in integrating new learning technologies on the other hand, the results were encouraging as staff interest is reasonably well anticipated. In contrast to this gain, a related hurdle is the implementation of an Academic Workload Management System in 2011 which appears to constrain opportunities for PD. Further hurdles include the size of our teaching lab, which only accommodates 10 staff, and University strategic priorities which can change without notice.

Implications for practice

This study has raised several implications for elearning PD practitioners that are specific to both the local setting and beyond. For instance, it has demonstrated the value of developing an elearning PD program based upon recognised and differentiated staff needs and to consider the most effective ways to schedule, coordinate and track participation, for efficient deployment of limited resources through sustainable practices.

A further implication relates to elearning PD for accreditation. In most institutions some form of mandatory staff development process is in place for new staff to gain an orientation to teaching and learning policies and practices, as is the case in the local setting. Contrastingly, it is expected that new staff will voluntarily participate in the elearning PD workshop program, despite the fact that many of them are employed exclusively to teach fully online. In this and other environments an absence of mandatory elearning PD may be the result of "domesticating tendencies of PD agendas" (Land, 2001, as cited in Southwell & Morgan, 2009, p. 8), which can be seen as an attempt to align PD to the specific and immediate needs of the institution for quality assurance purposes, as opposed to a more generic goal of advancing elearning practices. This is a strategic elearning issue and deserves further attention by policy makers.

There is also the need to pursue a more comprehensive evaluation process to assess our PD activities as it has often been reported that there is little correlation between staff reactions (e.g., enjoyment, satisfaction, usefulness, responsiveness to current needs) their learning, and changes to practice. But, whilst recognizing the need for comprehensive evaluation we are simultaneously mindful of Guskey's (1999) cautionary advice that "it is nearly impossible to obtain proof of the impact of professional development activities, but it is possible to obtain good evidence" (as cited in Southwell & Morgan, 2009, p. 8). Past research in this area does provide some significant directions for our future work, for instance, we are likely to explore content characteristics, process variables, and context characteristics, as well as organisational support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills and the related impacts on student learning outcomes. However, whilst striving to produce more comprehensive evaluation, we will be guided by the following advice from Nickols' (2000):

> There is no "cookbook" approach to the evaluation of training. To properly evaluate training requires one to think through the purposes of training, the purposes of evaluation, the audiences for the results of the evaluation, the points at which . . . measurements will be taken, the time perspective to be employed, and the overall framework to be utilised. (as cited in Southwell & Morgan, 2009, p. 8)

Conclusion

In administering the strategic elearning focus from the position of a centralised unit, optimization of further opportunities to align the general PD workshop program with the devolved elearning support available to staff within faculties and schools is necessary to generate targeted interest across particular cohorts (sessionals, novices, and mid-career elearning practitioners). This is likely to enhance participation and potentially generate a more even spread in elearning development across the institution.

Our analysis and discussion has revealed the complexities and uncertainties associated with the provision of elearning PD within a university environment. This we hope is a useful reminder of the complexity of factors that condition the effectiveness of elearning PD, within organisational contexts characterised by a constantly evolving learning technologies landscape, the challenge PD practitioners face to constantly refresh their knowledge of the technologies and update their resources, meet the needs of staff within a diverse and dynamic environment, and conduct comprehensive evaluation of PD activities to guide and enhance future initiatives.

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