



An integrated Faculty model for engaging staff with online and blended learning

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This paper reports on a faculty-wide implementation of an integrated model of professional development to enhance online teaching practice. A key aim was to draw on the thinking of key scholars, and to build on pockets of excellence already within some discipline groups, to develop a consistent level of good practice across the Faculty. The model incorporates four stages: informing staff of key research in the field, engaging staff in online practice, providing learning design teams to assist staff in implementing learning activities and the provision of ongoing support from colleagues through communities of practice. The paper describes the model and reports on progress to date.

Keywords: Online learning; Blended learning; Academic development; Communities of practice

Introduction

This paper describes the strategies employed by a multidisciplinary Faculty to ensure consistent good practice in their online teaching. The Faculty involved began as a primarily on-campus teaching faculty, at an outer-metropolitan campus of a medium-sized Australian university. Initially, most teaching staff regularly used the university's LMS (Learning Management System) to supplement their face-to-face teaching, but this was primarily as a repository for documents, rather than as an interactive teaching site. However, during the past decade, the Faculty has also been offering fully-online courses through Open Universities Australia (OUA). Student enrolments via OUA have undergone exponential growth, and now contribute over half the teaching load of the Faculty, with no signs of a slowdown in sight. More recently, the Faculty has expanded its teaching through off-shore partnerships. One of these is with Kaplan Singapore, where teaching is conducted in a mixed hybrid mode, involving four days of intensive face-to-face classes at the start of semester, followed by online teaching for the remainder of semester and a final invigilated exam.

As experience in online teaching has grown, pockets of good practice have developed across the faculty, including some truly innovative practice (for example, the early adoption of audio feedback to students, and the use of a virtual campus in Second Life), but the uptake on this has not been consistent, and awareness is often confined to small discipline-based groups. With the significant growth in online student enrolments, the Faculty has grappled with the challenges of enhancing the quality of online teaching across the entire faculty, to develop a consistently high standard, and also to encourage greater innovation and evaluation.

Online learning has become one of the biggest opportunities and challenges that universities are currently facing but, frequently, greater emphasis is placed on the development of content and on perceived administrative efficiencies than on the educational strategies being employed online. As Prendergast (2004) argues:

“Too often considerations about information technology have become the dominant factors in many strategies adopted by academic institutions. This has resulted in a rich information technological environment that fails to capture, motivate or retain the learners” (Prendergast, 2004, p. 2).

Brabazon (2002) takes this further, stating that

“teachers and teaching are being challenged and undermined through the internet. Learning is not technologically dependent. It is reliant on commitment, interest and passion” (p. 17).

Brabazon’s comments could equally apply to teaching as well as to learning, and this is a key point that the Faculty management has focused on – if we can improve the commitment, interest and passion of our teachers, we can improve the quality of our teaching. The Faculty has therefore taken a strategic approach to involve all staff in the processes, to engender enthusiasm for change, and to publicly reward those who successfully take up the challenge. A concurrent Faculty objective was to also improve the research profile of the faculty, so ideally, approaches adopted should also include models that generated research and publishing opportunities for staff.

Faculty-wide model

Scott (2003), in his overview of change management processes in higher education, suggests a number of key lessons that need be understood in order for successful change to occur. He suggests that change is not a discrete event but a complex and subjective process of learning and unlearning, and needs to be identified as relevant, desirable and feasible by those involved with the change process (Scott, 2003). With this in mind, we sought a model that would provide an evidence-based rationale for change in online teaching practice and would support staff at multiple points as they reflected, experimented and implemented new or revised online practices.

A strategic model was designed, with four key facets:

1. Stage 1 (Inform): To ensure teaching developments were informed by key thinkers in the field, a program of visiting scholars was implemented
2. Stage 2 (Engage): To provide hands-on experience for academics an intensive workshop program, revisiting the basics of online teaching in light of current research in the field, was developed, tagged with a major upgrade of the institution’s LMS
3. Stage 3 (Implement): To support implementation, a collaborative development model, comprising teams working on project-based development of online units and activities, was implemented
4. Stage 4 (Support): To support ongoing engagement, a Community of Practice model was designed.

International speakers

In 2010, senior faculty management undertook a study tour of key online institutions in UK and Western Europe. During the course of the visit, a number of invitations were extended to key innovators in online education to participate as part of a Visiting Professor Program scheduled over the next two years. In November 2010, the first of the visiting professors, Gilly **Salmon** visited the faculty for a week. Prof. Salmon is renowned for her research and practice in developing engaging and successful e-learning processes such as e-moderating (Salmon, 2004) and e-tivities (Salmon, 2002). During the week she presented workshops on: implementing innovation; team based designing of units for online learning; e-moderating; online activities (e-tivities) that foster active and interactive learning; and creating academic learning futures. In addition, a number of staff had the opportunity to discuss with her in small groups the challenges of their particular online experience.

Workshop program

For the next phase, a faculty-wide workshop program was implemented, targeted at both those new to online teaching, and those who have been predominantly teaching on-campus students, but may not have fully explored the options of online teaching. Staff who were more experienced in fully online teaching were also encouraged to participate – both in an attempt to ensure a consistently high standard of teaching across the Faculty, but also to enable sharing of practices that work well. The workshop program was scheduled to coincide with a major upgrade of the institution's LMS to encourage wider staff involvement.

Two workshops were developed: 'The basics of online teaching' and 'Learning activities and assessment online'. The first workshop revisited the accepted principles of good teaching practice (e.g. Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and covered aspects of online communication and community-building, including Salmon's 5-stage model (following on from her recent visit). The second workshop built on this, and focused on facilitating active learning in the online environment, and on efficiently providing quality feedback to students, and was based on the work of key thinkers in the fields of constructive alignment (e.g. Biggs, 2003), assessment (e.g. Ramsden, 2003) and feedback (e.g. Nicol, 2009; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Collaborative development model

Following on from the workshop program, teaching staff have been invited to participate in small 'Learning Design' groups to develop or redevelop their online units. Based on the Carpe Diem process (Armellini & Jones, 2008), the model applies a team approach to the design of units or programs. Each team is allocated a learning designer, subject librarian, language support staff, and technical support. Teams can be formed around a single academic teacher, or with small discipline-based groups.

Working in teams and seeking expertise from a range of people on matters related to their teaching is a major cultural change for many academic staff. The introduction of technology requires academic teachers to learn about not only the available technologies, but also project management, copyright laws, educational design, understanding of the students' learning experiences, student induction, and helpdesk support. While some of these demands and challenges are outside the control of the individual teacher, working as part of a team can help ease the transition in the changing teaching and learning environment (Kenny & McNaught, 2000).

The development teams are also encouraged and supported to evaluate their outcomes, and to contribute their findings back to the literature in the field. By facilitating this scholarship of teaching & learning approach, we hope that our developments will not only be informed by the latest thinking, but also become part of the ongoing discussions around best practice in online teaching.

Communities of Practice

For the final phase, ongoing support will be provided via a Community of Practice (CoP). Originally defined as an informal group of people who take a common interest in solving common problems (Lave and Wenger, 1991), CoPs have evolved to include three dimensions: a joint enterprise as understood and negotiated by the members; mutual engagement; and a shared repertoire of resources (routines, vocabulary, artifacts) that groups develop over time (Wenger, 1998). Interest in CoPs as a model to support educational practice in University settings has gained traction in recent times as a model of support for first year unit convenors (McDonald & Starr, 2008), and around engaging in reflective practice (Murphy & McIver, 2010). Wenger suggests

“COP... do not require much management but they can use leadership. They self organise but flourish when their learning fits with their organisational environment. The art is to help communities find resources and connections without overwhelming them with organisational meddling” (Wenger, 1998, p9).

In light of this, staff who have participated in the first three stages and would like to both support and be supported by other colleagues in the online environment will be invited to join a facilitated COP. The nature of each COP will be negotiated by the group, however the formation of groups has senior Faculty support and resources will be allocated to each group as needed.

Results and Conclusions

The strategies outlined above are currently work in progress. Stage 1 is an ongoing strategy, with visits from more world-renowned thinkers under negotiation. The attendance figures for the series of workshops presented by Prof Salmon were encouraging, with 62% of the academic teaching staff attending at least one session, and all 11 faculty disciplines represented. This level of engagement has provided the Faculty management with sufficient evidence to warrant funding further similar programs.

At the time of writing, the first rounds of the workshop program (stage 2) have been delivered, with four sessions of each workshop conducted. Enthusiasm for the program has been high, with all advertised sessions filling, and additional sessions being required. To date, 68% of the Faculty staff (50 of 73 academic teaching staff) have participated in at least one of the voluntary workshops. In addition, many staff recommended these workshops to their tutors (sessional or casual employees of the faculty). Anonymous feedback was collected from every session, via online surveys, and feedback has been highly positive. Participants particularly liked the mix of theory and literature with practical examples of how to implement these into their own teaching. Representative comments include:

- “Very good overview of online teaching and how to use this. For someone with little to no online teaching experience this was extremely valuable!”
- “Great content. I loved the fact that there were actual examples from real [local] staff about things like - chat room ground rules, welcome announcements etc - and that it was all very realistic about how students are (rather than theoretical).”
- “useful and helpful for reflecting on current teaching practice, importance of aligning assessment with objectives; and for reflecting on practical modifications necessary for on-line or blended delivery”

Most staff expressed satisfaction with the current workshop structure and wanted no change, whereas others requested more hands-on activities focused on the LMS, perhaps with smaller groups organized according to ability or familiarity with the software:

- “smaller group would be helpful so that we could work directly on our own project while expert assistance was available”
- “I'm not sure that it works to mix teaching and learning info/theory with mechanics of using a new system. Maybe it's about timing - at the moment I just want the latter.”

The timing of the workshops was also an issue, with most sessions scheduled immediately prior to the start of semester for on-campus students, and when many of our teachers were inundated with large marking loads from the summer semester for online students. This was unfortunate, but unavoidable, as scheduling of the workshops was tied to the introduction of the new LMS, so could not be organized for more convenient times. At this stage, we expect to offer further sessions of these workshops throughout semester, to cater for more of our tutors, and at the start of all subsequent teaching periods. Some sessions will be offered in the evenings or weekends, to accommodate online tutors who may also be working full-time in other employment.

Stage 3 (collaborative development of online units) is in progress. The first team, from the Sociology discipline have completed their two-day Carpe Diem workshop (Armellini & Jones, 2008), facilitated by Dr. Alejandro Armellini (University of Leicester, UK), and a second group from the Psychology discipline have completed their Carpe Diem workshop with a local facilitator. Anecdotal feedback immediately following both workshops was that participants enjoyed them immensely, and are confident of developing a well-designed online unit in time for the next semester. The multi-disciplinary team appears to have been successful, with some activities being developed by librarians and language support staff (after settling on overall design by the combined team), taking some of the burden from the teaching staff. Minor changes to the sessions within the workshop are being trialed, particularly to increase the focus on alignment of learning objectives and assessment; however the general format and structure of the Carpe Diem model appear highly successful.

Stage 4 is still in the development phase, and will be implemented during the coming months.

The team approach is increasingly being viewed as a central tenet of the Faculty's model. Supporting our academic teachers with broad expertise from librarians, web developers and learning designers, will help take much of the stress from the online teaching, and may facilitate greater engagement and innovation from our teachers, thus following the recommendations of Bates (2000) and Brabazon (2002).

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