



OT's Collaborating in IT: A team approach to improving learning and teaching using a staged implementation of technology

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Staff development is often conducted away from the workplace and in a hit and miss way where academic staff are given a 'dose of development' and then required to go back to their School or Faculty and be confident and comfortable in being able to enhance their learning and teaching activities with the new 'medicine'. Often these are 'one off' sessions and upon returning to the workplace the academic feels isolated and swamped by the pressures of day-to-day activities. This paper describes a team approach at a university between the occupational therapy (OT) academic staff and an e-learning educational specialist whose role it was to provide ongoing support to academic staff for the gradual implementation of an institution wide initiative to improve basic standards of online environments. This specialist worked one day per week in the School in which the occupational therapy program was taught. The process of working side-by-side overtime sparked a willingness by the occupational therapy team to explore and trial other technological components that would engage their students. This paper highlights the collaborative process and staged implementation of this initiative, outlines key examples of e-learning initiatives trialled by the OT team, and presents the outcomes of the project as perceived by all parties.

Keywords: teamwork, collaboration, staff development, online

Introduction

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is a multi-campus university with six campuses geographically separated across the Greater Western Sydney region where staff and students are often required to travel between campuses for lectures and tutorials. This dispersed nature has required the university to adopt a range of appropriate models of staff development that would help break down the travel barriers and encourage staff to take part in these activities. Jensen and Morgan (2009, p.3) commented that reducing the amount of time travelling between campuses or in scheduled training sessions was of vital importance to UWS academics who have a "burgeoning work volume associated with the university's unique structure and profile". This paper describes one approach to working with a team of academics 'in situ' in order to improve their understanding of how various technologies and associated strategies can improve their teaching and engagement with students.

Background

The School of Biomedical and Health Sciences offers a range of allied health and applied science programs at the University of Western Sydney. All programs use the vUWS (virtual UWS) online system as a minimum requirement to presenting course material and specific teaching and learning material within units of study. The university provides many e-learning courses but unless staff decided to attend there is no onus or requirement by staff to do more than the basics in presenting online material to students. An alternative approach to the centralised workshop provision was to allow for an e-learning specialist to work more intensively with the School one day per week.

The occupational therapy academic team are a small group of seven committed educators (4.5 EFT) who monitor and scrutinise teaching and learning student evaluations and adopt quality improvement initiatives to maintain quality in their teaching units. With the push towards a greater online presence at UWS in all units of study, the OT team agreed that there was a need to enhance student learning through the use of well-timed, and thoughtfully chosen e-learning strategies to bring to life the educational philosophies underpinning the curriculum. They were skilled lecturers in the context of their discipline and they brought a diverse and solid understanding of pedagogy but they had a varied understanding of how technologies can impact on the learning of their students. Some of the academics were confident users of the online environment while others had dabbled with variety of technologies with a student centred learning focus. With the presence of the e-learning specialist in situ, the time was right to work collaboratively and initiate a more intensive approach involving components of e-learning.

Methodology

An action learning framework for staff development was used to work with the group of staff to explore and develop relevant and appropriate approaches in a variety of teaching units. We believe that through inquiry learning rather than a full pre-planned range of activities the needs of individuals can be met and applied to the professional learning needs in this context (Revans, 1982; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993). Regular team meetings were a normal part of the team communication on teaching and administration matters but the additional IT component allowed for a combined sense of collaboration and contribution in an area that provided a shared understanding in a non-threatening environment. The e-learning specialist would attend team meetings when required to upskill all staff or to suggest ideas and methods to solve problems encountered along the way. This specialist who was versed in the technology as well as understanding the teaching and learning benefits allowed for change to happen.

A three-phased approach was adopted to allow for a gradual implementation of the ideas keeping in mind the workload demands of staff and the idea of 'taking on something extra'. This approach, supported by the specialist, an academic (e-learning), attempted to reduce the "technological overload" and keep in mind that "technology was a time-hungry learning curve not scheduled into WLAs (workload agreements) (Jensen & Morgan (2009, p.41). Through working with the whole team and then with individuals the cycle of plan, act, observe, reflect was used to review the process of the various implementations across the program. (Zuber-Skerritt, 1993).

Phase 1: A whole team approach to a new look and feel for the OT vUWS sites

As part of an institution wide approach to improving the quality of the online environments for students, our institution is conducting an ongoing implementation of a "Basic Standards" project with various approaches being used in working with the different Colleges and Schools. At SBHS the approach was to work intensively with one teaching program (Occupational Therapy), to apply these standards. This strategy and selection of the group was largely based on the cohesiveness of the OT team and their willingness to "get the job done". In the past the OT academic staff had designed their own vUWS sites, resulting in different looks and feels for each unit of study. As a method of enhancing a sense of professional identity for the students, it was agreed that all OT units should adopt a common design template and layout. With the support of the e-learning specialist a common 'enhanced' template was achieved through team collaboration and applied seamlessly across all OT teaching units with the minimum of upheaval prior to the start of session.

Phase 2: Individual forays in integrating technology components into their teaching

The involvement of the team in Phase 1 and the rapport that was established during that process facilitated a more open approach for others to investigate new strategies or further develop ideas that they had been tinkering with for some time. The following examples give an insight as to how this collaborative, in-situ e-learning project gave impetus to particular individuals within the team. Most of the units had approximately 50-70 students with some using small groups that were determined by the unit coordinator. Access to technology for students was in general purpose computer labs with most choosing to use the tools at home. Staff access was mainly used using office computers (or at home) due to the inconsistent and unreliable technologies available in teaching spaces. The inconsistency and lack of reliable access to the campus wireless network was also a contributing factor in as to when and where users (staff & students) engaged with the technologies.

Table 1: Examples of OT staff usage of particular e-learning strategies.

<p>Example 1: Using online reflective journals</p> <p><i>Occupation and social participation</i> is a core occupational therapy unit of study, which looks at teaching students about disability. One of the learning objectives for the unit is for students to reflect on their own and society's views of disability. In previous years this was done through the use of film, visit to a disability service organisation, written material from the people with disability, guest speakers, discussions and case studies within the classroom. Large classes have made reflective practices difficult and academics wanted to raise the superficial level of student understanding. There was a need to improve the reflective processes to enable students to deepen their understanding of this unit. Active reflection using stimulus material has been discussed in the literature as method to improve understanding of disability issues (Block et al, 2005; French & Swain, 2007)</p> <p>Students had to complete a compulsory but non-assessable online reflective journal. It consisted of six entries and the lecturer and the student who wrote them only viewed these entries. Each entry had a stimulus question that related to the work that had been completed that week. The final entry required the students to consider what they had learnt over the entire time of the unit and encouraged them to consider what action they could take as new therapists and within the broader context.</p> <p>A student's entry sums up some of the students' experiences:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Reading through my previous entries I can see that this exercise has encouraged me to think carefully and from the perspective of others, and pushed me to use my knowledge and research skills as an occupational therapy (OT) student, to reason through circumstances that people with difference and disability face on a day-to-day basis. I feel that prior to writing down my thoughts and reflections on the topics we were presented with, I had not really thought too deeply about the difficulties other people face when it comes to community participation and access.</p> <p>As a result of this strategy it was noted that students were more able to connect what they learnt and were more willing to write things that they wouldn't perhaps feel comfortable doing in class.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">I have...found the amount of homework [reflective journal] on top of assignments is very time consuming and difficult to fit in. Although the homework does help me to process and understand the information from workshops.</p> <p>The lecturer commented, "It allowed me to better gauge where learners were at and modify or reintroduce concepts or attitudinal issues within the face to face contact". It also reduced the awkward times in class when in large groups where students did not want to participate in giving their own opinions. It also allowed the lecturer to link stimulus readings or case studies to the reflective journal entries to enhance a deeper understanding.</p>
<p>Example 2: Using audio to enhance case studies and provide feedback</p> <p>As part of a first year unit small groups of students were required to explore the occupational therapy problem-solving process by examining real-life case studies. At pre-determined stages of the process, students were presented with additional information via audio, online, regarding the case. For example, an audio sample simulating an interview with the client's daughter. Students were required to apply their reasoning skills to adjust, adapt and accommodate this information into their occupational therapy treatment plan. This resource allowed the students to gain information in a conversational format that</p>

closely mimics the way that a family member may give information to an occupational therapist in the clinical setting.

With increased student numbers academics spend a considerable amount of time marking and providing feedback on assessment tasks. In order to provide quality and timely feedback the lecturer posted audio comments to first year students on their overall performance in an essay. This e-learning strategy saw a reduction in both the amount of written feedback required on individual essays and in the number of students that sought face-to-face feedback post assessment.

Example 3: *On-line simulation of client interviews to enhance clinical reasoning*

As part of a final year unit about ageing and the role of the occupational therapist with older people, students were required to engage in a simulated initial interview with a 'client' online. Using a discussion board, with the lecturer role-playing the client each student asked one question of the client. The lecturer would respond to each question in the way the client might do. This role-play tended to provide an authentic conversation between client and therapist.

Conducted in real time this interaction with a 'client' ensured students were asking recursive questions and not simply repeating the interview questions asked by other students.

This strategy facilitated clinical reasoning and problem solving in the student cohort and improved interview questioning skills.

UWS case study - this helped to develop clinical reasoning, gave me an idea of the info I would need to obtain when conducting an interview. (Student feedback forms)

It was also a cost effective method of achieving these outcomes.

Phase 3: Sharing with each other & the whole staff.

Through formal and informal discussions, the OT team, as a group and individually, developed increased awareness of each others' attempts to incorporate some of these e-learning strategies. This was an important part of the process as it allowed staff to do not only discuss the 'how to' part relating to the use of technology but also to evaluate the e-learning strategy in terms of learning potential. It meant that it was not just people on the help desk but the person in the next office. By working on changes on the whole of the course's website, and individual activities, it put the discussion about how to use new technologies firmly on the agenda.

A presentation and brief demonstration to the whole staff at a School meeting initiated discussions with other team coordinators with comments such as "how can I do this this?" and "I would like to try this with my team". This has become a catalyst to undertake similar strategies and a willingness to explore some of these ideas.

Conclusion

Engagement and interaction through technology is an essential aspect of many of our students' lives. In order that today's students are able to engage with and utilise the affordances of ever changing online environments and associated technological tools we need to develop and understand different ways of teaching and learning. The OT meetings served as a time for team building, for collaboration, for reflection and for sharing ideas. As noted by Collis and Moonen (2002): 'An individual's likelihood of voluntarily making use of a particular type of technology for a learning-related purpose is a function of four 'E's: the environmental context, the individual's perception of educational effectiveness and of ease of use, and the individual's sense of personal engagement with the technology' (p. 219). These meetings and individual discussions enabled and facilitated all of these factors.

We have discussed some perspectives of the theoretical frameworks and the affordances of the technologies in an earlier paper (Olney & Lefoe, 2007,) and the issues identified included "access and use of informal support and just in time support"(p.801). Academic staff are working harder than ever, and unless support is close at hand, new strategies won't get off the ground. E-learning can enhance reflection and clinical reasoning required in all allied health, medicine, and nursing and other health programs. These examples are just the beginning. Staff are talking about doing more – but it has to be real, worthwhile, educationally appropriate/matched to outcomes.

This three phase team approach to staff development has provided some useful insight and strategies as to how we can better support academic staff to engage online and improve access for and contact with students. It has demonstrated the importance of “Faculty development for existing and future faculty is a pivotal investment for integrating technology in higher education; it can catalyze innovations in learning across generations.” (Moore, Moore, & Fowler, 2005, p.11.1).

The team’s enthusiasm and commitment to improving the current situation, willingness to change and adapt their understandings to improve student outcomes was a key driver for this collaboration. The staff who engaged in these e-learning enhancements of their units saw it as an opportunity to engage students and deepen the learning experience and undertook it in addition to their already busy workloads. The e-learning specialist academic’s ability to build rapport with the team, translate ideas into workable e-learning strategies and support staff in this process meant that the collaboration achieved the outcomes desired by all parties.

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