Transformation through transition: learning through 'theory of change'

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The poster presents an overview of the 'MyUni Transform' project underway at The University of Adelaide. This involves institution-wide transition, between May 2016 and December 2017, to a single Learning Management System from three systems currently in use in the University (the move is to Instructure Canvas from, principally, Blackboard Learn and, additionally, Moodle and an in-house system). Rather than implementing transition through automated roll-across of existing learning content and design, the project is approaching the transition process as an opportunity to facilitate significant transformation in blended learning design and practice across the University, in alignment with the goals of its Strategy for Learning, Teaching and Assessment (2016-18). The poster identifies key elements of the change approach that has been adopted, and outlines a 'theory of change' impact evaluation perspective that is seen to have value for ongoing monitoring of, reflection on, and learning from, the project's early stages and beyond.

Keywords: Learning Management System, Canvas, Learning Design, Theory of Change

Strategic Context

The University of Adelaide's Strategic Plan 2013-2023 establishes an ambitious commitment to transformation of the institution's digital learning environment. It places a particularly strong focus on enhanced use of blended learning for campus-based study, to increase flexibility in modes of learning and to leverage digital technologies in support of the institution's signature pedagogical approach, the Small Group Discovery Experience (SGDE). The University's Strategy for Learning, Teaching and Assessment (2016-18) aligns with this plan and establishes goals for the use of digital technologies in enabling active, collaborative and discovery-oriented learning, including authentic assessment, and in fostering co-creation and partnership approaches to student learning. It includes a commitment to digital literacies development, both for staff and students, to greatly enhanced use of learning analytics, and to sharing and reuse of digital learning assets for example as generated through the University's AdelaideX MOOCs.

MyUni Transform

Guided by the strategic priorities outlined above and with the aim of improving student and staff satisfaction with the institutional digital learning environment, a scheduled periodic review of the University's existing LMS environment (principally Blackboard Learn and, additionally, Moodle and an in-house system) was undertaken in the second half of 2015, involving extensive user consultation and comparison of system options.[14] The decision was taken in early 2016 to move to cloud-supported Instructure Canvas as its sole Learning Management System, referred to locally as 'MyUni'. The strategic decision was taken early on to invest in the transition process as an unprecedented opportunity to facilitate significant transformation in blended and online learning design and related educational practice at the level of the whole institution.

This meant that, rather than implement transition seamlessly through minimum intervention and automated roll-across of existing learning content and design, the project instead seeks to engage all coordinators of around 2,300 courses in a developmental process of supported learning design based on a combination of at-elbow individual support for pedagogical and technical aspects, and access to peer networks for dialogue and collaborative exchange. The aim is to support adoption of best-practice blended and online learning design principles in a light touch, flexible way that teaching staff can adopt and sustain, and which addresses student feedback at the University on current use of MyUni. For example, consultation feedback showed that reasonable consistency in MyUni course interface layout was a key requirement for students. The MyUni Transform project aims to ensure that all courses meet

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[14] Comparison was made between Blackboard Learn (rather than Ultra) and selected other systems.

the University's 'Guidelines for Minimum Use of MyUni' by embracing learning design uplift during the implementation; more than this, it aims to introduce all course coordinators to new ways of achieving their educational goals by drawing on the new tools and functionality at their disposal including, for example, the area of learning analytics. Implementation of the Echo360 Active Learning platform (entailing a move from the University's previous in-house lecture capture system) is incorporated into the MyUni Transform project, and learning analytics from these educational technologies are being explored. At the start of Semester 2 2016, around 200 'first wave' courses went live in Canvas and Echo, and the project timeline aims for all courses from the start of 2017 to be delivered using these platforms. Key features of the change process are:

- Seven hours individual staff support per course, through eLearning Advisors and MyUni Transform trained students working as casual staff;
- Templated interface design based on activity-focused learning design principles;
- Suite of institution-wide professional development activities to enhance active learning and assessment practices including MyUni for SDGE, plus online resources;
- Peer support (inter-faculty communities of practice; Adelaide Education Academy - Education Specialists; within-faculty academic eLearning Fellows; within-faculty peer support initiatives);
- Alignment with digital library resources support including reuse of digital assets generated at the University of Adelaide and of open access resources, plus digital literacies project;
- MyUni technical troubleshooting support plus Canvas user community and 24/7 support service.

Learning through theory of change

> Some initiatives to enhance learning and teaching in universities have limited effects because they lack a robust, well-developed and explicit change theory […] Every innovation is imbued with a theory or theories of change. However, these usually remain tacit, unchallenged and […] are often ineffective, misconceived or even counter-productive (Trowler 2015).

A theory of change is a predictive assumption about the relationship between desired outcomes of a change program and the actions and resources/enablers that may produce those changes. Approaches to the evaluation of change programs that adopt a theory of change approach focus not just on whether desired outcomes eventually are met but, iteratively, on the process factors that it is anticipated will facilitate change. These approaches usually are established through stakeholder participation from the start of change programs, and are used to guide ongoing monitoring, reflection and review. In the case of MyUni Transform, this approach to evaluation was not initiated at the project outset. However, it offers a promising framework for ongoing project monitoring and review, inviting the project team and stakeholders to consider the theories informing action and their effects, whether implicit/explicit or informal/formal. Trowler (2015) cautions against a technical-rational understanding of change in complex university environments, advocating instead a social practice perspective that focuses attention on situated social and relational practices involving agency, structure and the role of artefacts in material mediation of practice. Reflecting this perspective, he advocates a change approach based on, *inter alia,* sensitivity to context and history; 'low resolution' initial planning and vision; extensive participant engagement, discussion, consensus building; inclusive decision-making; acceptance of diversity; encouragement of challenges to *status quo;* local self-organisation; recognition of the importance of artefacts in shaping practices; permissiveness toward adaptation; high quality information; frequent feedback cycles; acceptance of variable outcomes in short term; and willingness to allow time for fundamental changes to occur. These recommendations, and the principles of compatible perspectives, such as situated learning theory (Wenger 1998), offer valuable points of reference against which to test and adjust the assumptions underpinning the MyUni Transform project in the course of project review and evaluation over the coming year and beyond.

Conclusion

MyUni Transform is a strategic, institution-wide approach to transformation of educational practice through a LMS transition process. It is hoped that ongoing monitoring and review of challenges and successes, from a theory of change perspective, will afford valuable insights not just for the University of Adelaide but for other institutions taking a similar path.

References

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