

ONLINE PEDAGOGY AND THE CHALLENGES FOR ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the implementation and evaluation of an academic professional development program to support the institutional integration of a learning management system (WebCT) at Monash University. The program aimed to take an integrated approach; using a combination of a general workshop series; specialized tailored sessions provided on request for small, Faculty-based groups; and online third party instructional material and tutorials. This paper briefly describes the design and implementation issues, presents the key evaluation findings and raises critical issues in relation to academic staff development in the context of in a large multi-campus, research-focused University.

Keywords

WebCT, professional development, online pedagogy

Introduction

Australian universities are operating in an increasingly competitive and globalised environment. A key area of competition relates to attracting, retaining and graduating highly employable students. This and other competitive pressures has led Australian Universities to engage with flexible teaching and learning strategies including online learning, to enhance the quality of its programs and to prepare graduates with desirable attributes. Monash University is not immune to these pressures and has taken the strategic decision to make use of a variety of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to support its strategic objectives. Monash is Australia's largest research-intensive University: it has eleven faculties, national and international campuses, an institutional culture that may be characterized as 'devolved' where Faculties have enjoyed considerable autonomy from central intervention, and an equally diverse student cohort. The University's key strategic directions are outlined in the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/dvcap/ltpoverview.doc>). Monash's commitments to the use of online technologies to achieve identified strategic outcomes improve the undergraduate and postgraduate experience of learning and extend its market, reflect contemporary trends in higher education in Australia and globally (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

In keeping with its interest in taking a strategic approach to such initiatives, in 2001 Monash committed to support an institutional course management tool WebCT. The WebCT project (<http://www.its.monash.edu.au/projects/webct/index.html>) had the following broad aims:

- WebCT will support Monash's commitment to student-centred flexible learning by offering flexibility in course presentation and mode of teaching for teachers and students to manage their learning environment
- WebCT will make available a standard environment for staff to enable them to develop courses with a consistent package of tools for a predictable outcome. Addition of extra tools will not

require staff to learn new products and interfaces. Students will access learning materials in a consistent way through the Portal integrated with WebCT

- WebCT will allow course materials and interactive tools to be accessed by students on any campus and by off-campus students

Approaches to academic staff development that seamlessly incorporate both technical skills and pedagogy ought to serve to model quality teaching practices within any LMS (Ellis & Phelps, 2000). Moreover, academic staff need to be engaged in relevant and active professional development environments that enable them to operate within the LMS milieu and also to develop an informed critical perspective of the use of the LMS across a variety of teaching modes (Fox & Herrmann, 2000). While integrated environments such as WebCT provide an apparently simple interface for using a suite of Internet-based information and communication tools, one needs to be mindful of the extensive literature that challenges the capacity of any LMS, educational technology or related policy discourses to lead sustainable and critical pedagogical change in higher education (see for example Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Evans & Nation, 2000, Lazerson, Wagener & Shumanis, 1999; Nicholl, 1998; Holt, Rice, Smissen & Bowly, 2001).

Monash supports many and varied Faculty-based initiatives related to online learning, curriculum development and staff development broadly. However, this paper describes the current centrally-supported professional development program at Monash which aims to introduce academic staff to the technicalities of WebCT as well as the potential of WebCT as a tool for innovation in tertiary pedagogy. The program is conducted through the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching Support (<http://www.celts.monash.edu.au>). This paper will describe the current strategy, review key evaluation findings and critically outline implications for practice. It does this in the context of Monash University, a large multi-campus research-focused University.

An integrated approach to professional development

The program in summary

During 2001, an integrated staff development program which incorporated stakeholder beliefs about best practice in the field, was implemented institutionally. The program aimed to adopt multiple approaches to academic development, ranging from generic workshops catering to large numbers to staff, to mentor networks operating within faculties and/or schools. Table 1 annotates the principle features of the program and it is described in detail elsewhere (Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002). The workshop series was the key component.

Key findings of the workshop evaluation

As the key component of the program, the workshop series has been evaluated extensively. All staff are asked to complete an open-ended evaluation questionnaire at the end of Workshop 1, where it doubles as an example of a WebCT survey for workshop participants to experience. At the end of Workshop 4, that is, at the end of the complete series of workshops, staff are again asked to complete a similar survey. This means that those staff who did not complete all four workshops, do not complete a second evaluation form. However, it was thought to be too time consuming and repetitive to justify asking staff to evaluate each workshop separately. It was also thought to be easier for staff to nominate areas of difficulty once they had completed the full complement of workshops.

Overwhelmingly, participants are satisfied with the current structure and presentation style of the workshops and have not recommended any changes to their future delivery. The combination of hands-on experience and discussion, as well as having two presenters in attendance, was considered beneficial by participants.

Participants were impressed by WebCT's functionality and usability. Participants believed the workshop goals were met, that they understood the key functionality of WebCT to enable them to start to use it pragmatically in their teaching, or alternatively thought it was too early to tell what was still unclear. The best understood features of WebCT proved to be the communication tools, particularly the discussion tool, as well as the overall range of functionality and flexibility.

In the most recent series of workshops (conducted over the summer of 2002-2003), some participants found the amount of information presented daunting. On reflection, it is our impression that many of the participants in the first series of workshops may have been 'early adopters' (see Rogers (1995) for the

seminal discussion of the dissemination of innovations and the categories of ‘adopters’), or those with an intrinsic interest in teaching online. Less competent and confident workshop participants raise new challenges for training staff in terms of providing appropriate support during training sessions, while still covering enough of the necessary content, and this is reflected in recent survey responses commenting on ‘information overload’.

Strategy	Description
Generic workshop program	Sequential series of four workshops, each building on the previous content: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using WebCT as a student 2. Design principles, communication & collaboration tools 3. Adding content to WebCT 4. Online assessment activities
Customised training	Training programs designed to suit local or specific demands, conducted when and where required, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpdesk staff • Library staff • Conducted at specific locations (e.g. Parkville, Malaysia)
Online resources (produced by a third party)	A set of accessible, easy-to-read manuals, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catering for both staff & student level access • Available in both Word and pdf formats
Faculty or School support groups	Training staff working with groups in Faculties or Schools at a range of different levels, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty committees • Local WebCT support groups • Curriculum development teams • Template development teams
On-call support	Provided until role of CeLTS helpdesk formalized

Table 1: The WebCT academic staff development program

The program discussed in this paper was developed explicitly to support teams or groups of academic staff within faculties and departments. While the collaborative support paradigm has been well accepted by staff and their faculties/departments and is facilitating the growth of teams of academic staff working cooperatively on and within WebCT sites, support has also been provided on an ad hoc basis to individual staff.

Educational technologies and the challenges for academic professional development

Monash University’s policy commitment to the potential of ICT for pedagogy necessarily demands an operational commitment to provide academic staff with appropriate resources and opportunities to engage with tools such as WebCT. In particular this needs to include information about the way tools can be used to improve pedagogy and enable innovation in flexible approaches to tertiary education. The staff development program discussed here, as part of the institutional WebCT Implementation Project, has been part of a suite of diverse activities across the University. In this way, Monash is attempting to integrate human and other resources with the strategic use of communication and information technologies in academic programs.

The program and its evaluation has raised several issues for us which we believe have implications for the way in which academic development strategies related to online pedagogies are designed and implemented, particularly at large multi-campus institutions such as Monash.

Principally, these are:

1. The contribution of academic professional development to organizational change.
2. Collaborative practice and team-based action learning as best practice in online pedagogy.
3. Developing rational resource allocation for strategic ‘just-in-time’ training.

4. The importance of researching practice to inform practice and policy development.

The contribution to organizational change

Ideally any engagement with educational technologies in tertiary pedagogy must enable academic discipline areas to reconceptualize their pedagogical models and practices in keeping with contemporary research in the field as they try to meet the demands of a volatile national and international higher education environment. The program was conceived to introduce academic staff to the 'tools' of WebCT and to do so in such a way that would enable staff to see exciting possibilities for pedagogical change. We have indicated that there have been a number of other Faculty-based activities across the University that have been concerned with such issues.

Essentially then, the staff development WebCT program at Monash is about organizational change. If we concede that the expansion of ICTs in tertiary pedagogy is also about innovation, then the broad WebCT project, including the staff development program reported here, is fundamentally concerned with the dissemination of innovation. Rogers (1995) is recognised as an authority on the diffusion of innovations. He has defined innovativeness as the "...degree to which an individual or other unit of adoption is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than the other members of the system" (p. 22). He has categorised 'adopters' on the basis of innovativeness: these are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. Early adopters are considered a more integrated part of the local social system than are innovators: "...the early adopter decreases uncertainty about a new idea by adopting it and then conveying a subjective evaluation to near-peers through interpersonal networks" (Rogers 1995, p. 265).

There is growing debate about the role that centralized and operational-level (i.e. Faculty/Department-based) staff development initiatives might play in promoting innovative practice and organizational change in Universities. It is outside the scope of this paper to review that literature, however, based on our experience, the way in which staff development initiatives that claim to 'operationalise' institutional strategic interests are best structured, deserves our considered and on-going attention. While we have attempted to 'cover all bases' in the diverse, integrated approach we have taken with the resources available to us in this early phase of the University's engagement with WebCT, we need to explore further the way in which our activities might be seen as contributing to the kind of *sustainable curriculum change* towards student-centred flexible pedagogy to which Monash University aspires. Therefore we need to consider how we might 'innovate' in the field in regard to both 'training' strategies and organizational structures for change. Institutionally, it could be argued that Monash has begun to formulate an approach to implementation that reflects the 'Collis Twente Model' reported in Bottomley, Spratt & Rice (1999), which

"seeks to make changes in pedagogy, use of technology, organisational cultures, organisational structures and the methodology (conduct) of work coevally, not sequentially, and throughout the initiation, implementation and institutionalisation phases of technology adoption"

Collaborative practice and action learning work as best practice in academic development for online pedagogy

Encouraging staff to work in teams as a pedagogical device is consistent with current views about academic work and particularly important in the context of staff development and educational technologies (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Kandlbinder, 2000; Spratt, Palmer & Coldwell, 2000). One challenge inherent in such models of practice is to overcome the perception of intellectual academic activity as individually-centred and controlled which potentially limits opportunities for effective collaboration (Ellis & Phelps, 2000).

There is a profuse literature that explores the place of action learning as a form of academic development (see Kember 2001 for a recent review in the context of educational technology). The way in which the program evolved has been mindful of this literature and our practice experience confirms the importance of action learning and collaborative practice to achieve desired outcomes. In the context of this program, we have seen the very concrete benefits in collaborating with our colleagues in Faculties as part of a team. It is in this area in which we believe interest will grow as the use of WebCT matures at Monash.

Developing rational resource allocations for strategic 'just-in-time' training

Importantly, the program's success has made us confront the dilemma of how best the University might develop the initiatives of 'early adopters' so that their colleagues join them in their use of technology to improve teaching and learning. As we have already indicated there are numerous faculty and department-based initiatives that aim to support staff in their curriculum initiatives in light of their particular strategic and policy goals.

Pragmatically, in light of the program reported here, and in direct response to feedback from staff, both via the workshop evaluation surveys and from Faculty and Department groups, the training team is currently preparing two further workshops. These are to be designed for staff who have completed the existing series of four workshops and who have gained some familiarity with WebCT. The intention is to take a problem-solving approach in these workshops: to encourage staff to bring practice-based problems and their own materials to workshops. In doing so these workshops will aim to broaden the discussion about the functionality of WebCT as well as encourage more in-depth discussion of its pedagogical applications.

Our ongoing approach and collaborative work with our colleagues in faculties and departments will be iterative and diverse in a way that we hope sees the use of WebCT as the centrally supported LMS continue to evolve from educational considerations and professional development out of the needs of staff engaged in real work.

Such approaches are consistent with Taylor et al (1996) who claim that professional development needs to:

“take place within a professional learning community providing opportunities for collaboration, and for conversations about teaching and learning;

focus conversations on teaching and learning and specifically on beliefs about teaching and learning and the assumptions that underlie those beliefs; and

indicate sought educational outcomes rather than focus on a commitment to particular methods of delivery, course production etc. as this becomes a barrier to change rather than an agent of change (p.xiii)”

If the demands of 'just-in-time' and 'on-the-job' training and assistance in relation to WebCT specifically, and online pedagogies more broadly, expand at Monash in line with the experience at other institutions, then our laudable ideas about being innovative will have major implications for the resourcing of staff development initiatives and the way in which such resources are allocated centrally and across faculties and departments.

Researching practice

Arguably, one of the most rewarding aspects of the WebCT program we have discussed here has been the way we believe the program has assisted in expanding the interest of our colleagues in the possibilities of researching their pedagogical practices. While we will continue to foster and support such initiatives, the team is developing a research project that aims to investigate the way in which ICTs, in particular the use of WebCT, have begun to influence pedagogical experiences and outcomes for students and academic staff. The project team is particularly interested in taking an interpretative methodological approach to the investigation that will 'illuminate' the way in which students and academic staff have come to engage with WebCT and to explore the changing face of the pedagogical experience at Monash.

Conclusion

We believe part of the success of the program can be attributed to the appropriate balance of flexibility, willingness to provide practical and cheerful support and sensitivity to the culture prevailing within the university. The integrated program has been very successful if we use the measure of the number of staff participating in the program and their satisfaction with workshops as represented in the returns to the

workshop surveys. However, we still have significant challenges in moving to sustainable and durable networks of support for staff that the program has already successfully initiated.

In summary, our experience in this program has confirmed our beliefs that academic development in the setting of online pedagogies is a dynamic process of being engaged critically with practice. It needs to be change oriented and also informed by the scholarship of tertiary pedagogy. We need to continue to be able to develop approaches to academic staff development that are proactive and innovative, drawn from and informed by the complexities and educational problems that arise in practice. It is our contention that innovative approaches to professional development have the potential, to promote the kinds of *sustainable change* and improvement in online pedagogy that can accommodate institutional and departmental strategic initiatives, and the more personal interests of academics and academic groups, amidst the day-to-day demands of academic work in the contemporary academy.

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