



A scholarship program for academic staff to develop exemplary online learning tasks

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There is a strong impetus for blended learning approaches to be more widely adopted in higher education but finding an effective model for professional development of teaching staff can be problematic. In 2009, Curtin University developed an eTeaching and Learning Scholarship program for academic staff to develop exemplary online learning tasks that could be shared with the university community and inform future online teaching within their disciplines. This paper describes the design of the professional learning program together with early encouraging results that indicate both the willingness of the eScholars to incorporate additional learning technologies to extend the affordances of the university provisioned systems and to embrace authentic learner-centred tasks.

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Professional development for blended learning

Web-based learning environments in higher education commonly support traditional face to face teaching. This approach, referred to as 'blended learning' (Bonk & Graham, 2006), has arisen to accommodate understandings of student learning and the flexibility necessitated by student life-style choices and realities (Kahn, 2007). There is a strong impetus for blended learning approaches to be more widely adopted in higher education but many staff are unaware of the benefits, or are resistant to the approach. Providing professional learning for academics is problematic. High workloads and pressures to increase research output result in time constraints for academics engaging in professional learning. Traditional workshop formats have benefits but often the results are short lived. Approaches such as action learning (McGill & Beaty, 2001) where new technologies are incorporated within course

design (Littlejohn, 2002) have the potential to cater to the future needs of academic staff facing an unknown future.

Over the last two years strategic funding at Curtin University has seen the implementation of a range of technologies that support a blended learning approach and extend the affordances of the learning management system, Blackboard. These technologies include Campus Pack Fusion blogs, wikis and journals, Elluminate virtual classroom, iLecture/Echo360 video and audio capture software, and an ePortfolio tool.

Scholarships to support innovative practice

In 2009, the University provided strategic support in the form of *eTeaching and Learning* scholarships for academic staff to develop exemplary online learning tasks that could be shared with the University community and inform future online teaching within their disciplines. The program was implemented to support the University's focus on blended learning and, in particular, to support the following strategic criteria:

- to improve the quality and provision of learning through the introduction of flexible learning/teaching methodologies for all students;
- to improve retention by enhancing the learning experience of first year students, in particular part-time students, school leavers and mature age students;
- to improve the quality of teaching in large classes;
- to implement teaching and learning approaches that accommodate cultural diversity.

All academic staff in the university were advised of the program and were asked for expressions of interest to participate in the program. Applicants were required to provide detailed plans of innovative and engaging pedagogical strategies involving online learning tasks. Ten *eTeaching and Learning* scholarships were awarded, each to the value of \$10,000, to be spent on approved teaching buyout or resources associated with the project. A number of the scholarships were awarded to teams of academics with a total of 22 staff engaged in 10 projects.

Successful applicants attended four one-hour workshops to gain a greater understanding of new and emerging technologies available for Curtin staff and students, and to plan online learning activities to use with students in their 2010 classes. The first two workshops provided a staged overview of available learning technologies within the university's network, an introduction to mobile technologies as learning tools, some Web 2.0 tools that are commonly used in education, and a review of characteristics of authentic learning, in particular, as it relates to e-learning (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007; Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010).

Wherever possible, the eScholars were engaged in a practical experience of the technology within a clear pedagogical framework. They were then encouraged to create an ePortfolio to reflect on how they could adapt a learning task within their semester units to incorporate one or more e-learning technologies. An eScholars social bookmarking site was also established to assist sharing of resources and collaboration. The last two workshops adopted an *action learning* approach to facilitate the eScholars' development of a preliminary framework for implementing their learning activities and commencing a scaffolded review and reflection process. The workshops and associated activities served to provide contextualised community support for the professional learning of the academics involved in the project.

Implementation of the learning approaches

Of the 10 eScholar projects supported in the program, three were conducted in the initial phase of activities in Semester 1, 2010. The remaining seven projects will be undertaken in Semester 2, 2010. As well as web 2.0 technologies, the projects incorporate student video capture, ePortfolios and branching scenarios using Powerpoint. Three initial project descriptions are provided below:

Project 1: Using blogs to explore humans as occupational beings: Matthew Molineux

This project focused on the first year unit, *Health and Occupation*, for approximately 150 undergraduate and 25 graduate entry students. Most students in this unit study to become occupational

therapists, but a small number choose the unit as an elective within the Faculty of Health Sciences. The unit introduces students to an occupational perspective of humans and health. In the project, blogs were used in preference to individual journals to encourage student collaboration and reflection.

Students were allocated to one of three groups and each group was assigned three topics throughout the semester, which linked directly with the weekly topics covered in lecture/tutorials. Each tutorial group (of approximately 25 students) was required to create a blog in Campus Pack Fusion within Blackboard, which was private to that group of students and all unit tutors. Each student was required to write and post a 300-word blog entry on each topic within one week of the topic being introduced. Throughout the semester, tutors reviewed the blog entries and provided formative feedback (on individual entries and/or as a composite for all the entries that week) and students then commented on a minimum of five entries over the semester. Students were encouraged to review their own entries in light of the feedback and edit them throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, students were required to submit the final versions of their blog entries along with the five comments they made on other students entries for summative assessment worth 40% of the final unit mark.

Each tutorial group was provided with an eLearning Mentor for the duration of the unit. The main role of the eLearning Mentors was to provide peer support for one tutorial group of students. Rather than being directed and prescriptive, it was envisaged that the support provided would be dependent on the needs of the first year students, but essentially the eLearning Mentors would be a first contact for advice, help, hints and tips on either using the technology or finding appropriate sources of information. In order to model blog writing, but also in an attempt to engage with students in a familiar medium, the unit coordinator set up and maintained a blog on blogspot.com. First contact was made with students before the semester started via an email which directed them to the blog. Throughout the semester the blog was used as the primary avenue for communication with students. Successful outcomes of the project:

- Students completed the blogs and each tutorial group compiled a detailed summary of most of the key aspects of the unit;
- Students commented freely and positively on each other's blog entries as required;
- The unit coordinator's blog developed well and most students checked it regularly, with a small number subscribing to be notified of regular updates.

While initial results were positive, reflection on the implementation over the semester resulted in ideas for improvements and refinements for future implementations:

- Do not assume a familiarity with technology even though the majority of first year students are allegedly familiar with digital technologies. Some students seemed to struggle with what some might see as quite basic technology/systems issues, and so need more guidance (perhaps from eLearning Mentors);
- Consider making student blogs more public (e.g., by locating them on sites such as blogspot.com rather than within Blackboard) and orchestrating involvement with other students, academic and researchers from within the school and around the world;
- Consider staff being more active in facilitating online discussions;
- Require students to demonstrate how they have incorporated feedback from staff and students in their summative assessment.

Project 2: Using wikis to investigate theories of teaching and learning and how these impact on the primary classroom: Sheena O'Hare

In 2009, Curtin began offering a Bachelor of Education (Primary) program fully online apart from practicum school placements. Unit materials are delivered through Blackboard, and considerable thought was given to assisting student development in the use of technology and optimising the likelihood of active engagement. Contrary to initial expectations (and also reported in other projects), not all students were technologically sophisticated. Indeed many students were tentative—frightened that they would break something—and generally nervous about learning technologies. However, it was not only the students who were new to this environment. Most of the teaching staff, although very experienced educators, were unfamiliar with technologies that would support and enhance the learning process. With more than 1000 students and multiple tutors involved in the unit, in this trial it was

essential that we identified technologies that could be accessed and utilised with minimal external assistance.

EtherPad, an application that offered synchronous chat within a Wiki site, provided the simplest introduction to this collaborative technology. It allowed instantaneous document revision, a time slider where students could view revisions over time, colour coding of participants and complete privacy of submissions. The first step was to allow students to form themselves into wiki groups of five from their larger tutorial group. Students began to exchange ideas and create links with one another while being engaged in a common purpose. Those who had not managed to organise themselves into a group were supported to do this by their tutor. This allowed tutors to identify those students who were still unsure of the technology and to offer additional help and guidance.

The assessment task was an investigative group assignment. As well as a rubric for presentation of the assignment, an additional detailed marking rubric was created to reflect the effectiveness of individual members' participation within the group. Students were asked to complete a participation assessment for each member of their group. When marking this assignment, tutors became aware of another advantage of Etherpad. When evaluating the comments made by students about their group members' participation and effort, it was very easy to verify or query the comments made by accessing the group on its Etherpad site. This increased the validity of assessment and avoided a common area of concern with group assignments—that some students do very little work and are still able to obtain a high score because of other students' efforts. Although initially trialled in one unit, wiki tools like Etherpad and Write with Me have been successfully incorporated into other units and have also been independently used by students for collaboration, indicating their usefulness as a learning tool.

Project 3: Using Twitter to facilitate student interaction in a fully online unit: Tama Leaver

This activity occurred in *Web Communications 101* as part of the Bachelor of Arts (Internet Communications) or Bachelor of Mass Communications. The aim of the project was to encourage different forms of student peer interaction, and student-teacher interaction, across a range of communication tools. The premise was that student learning would be enhanced and be more enjoyable, if students had an array of non-assessed interaction options. The use of social media tools was also thematically and practically relevant to the material covered in the unit, which explores the emergence of the world wide web, the shift to 'Web 2.0' and the emergence of social media.

Twitter was introduced mid-way through the unit and students were encouraged to set up an account and try out the platform. Student Twitter use was not assessed, but they were asked to identify themselves as students and use a hashtag to locate their peers. A hashtag is simply a shared piece of text, beginning with the # symbol, which, initially set up through social convention among Twitter users, serves to group tweets together in a manner easily searchable. Students were encouraged to include the #web101 hashtag in their initial tweets, and many students found each other on Twitter, and became regular users. More than 50 students used Twitter multiple times, with tweets ranging from questions about assessment and course material, to students sharing interesting resources and links, through to social interactions not directly related to the unit at all. This rich diversity of informal learning and social interaction is exactly what the project was designed to enhance.

In a short survey (n=51), at the end of the study period, 86% of students indicated that Twitter had been easy to understand and use, while 53% found it a useful tool for interacting with each other, and with tutors. Twitter was by no means universally popular, but the nature of informal non-assessed platforms meant that students who enjoyed using Twitter did so, while those who did not used other tools or continued to engage with the more traditional discussion boards. In future units, the issue of staff involvement needs to be better addressed since Twitter is used socially by tutors and students. Questions about assessments, for example, often ended up being discussed late at night, or on weekends, which is not always ideal. Twitter, and other tools, will continue to be part of Web Communications 101, and the overall response to encouraging informal learning through social media tools has been a very positive learning experience. The nature of social media means that new tools will always be emerging, and one of the things the unit will need to address is how best to encourage students to identify and bring new communication tools into the unit so they and their peers try them out as informal learning spaces.

Conclusion

The eScholars program has introduced a more critically aware and reflective approach on the part of the lecturers involved. The case studies begin to highlight the changes in pedagogy that are brought to bear as well as the introduction of more learner-centred tasks. The formative and authentic nature of the tasks has also begun to highlight needs in student learning such that teaching staff can more readily identify where scaffolding is required. The non-prescriptive approach that allows the eScholars to identify elearning tools that best meet the needs of their discipline and student cohort seems to be proving successful in raising the general level of engagement in blended learning. The eScholars have been able to comfortably and effectively incorporate additional, often ubiquitous and vernacular technologies in their teaching and learning to extend the affordances of the university provisioned systems. This seems to have been of particular value in those units with very large enrolments where the choice of technologies and teaching strategies helped facilitate and streamline the management of learning activities. The eScholar program will be conducted again in 2011.

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