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FROM SMALL TO LARGE HITS: SPREADING THE ONLINE MESSAGE TO ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF VIA STRATEGICALLY-TARGETED DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

This paper reports on how a university is implementing a capacity-building academic staff development program using a three-pronged approach that draws on adult learning, social learning and capacity-building literature. This approach was designed to enable staff to provide engaging and pedagogically sound online experiences for the students at the University of Newcastle, NSW Australia. Data have been gathered throughout the implementation of this program to evaluate its impact and to inform future refinements of the program. The paper concludes with reflections from staff facilitating the program about the challenges, successes and future of the program.

Introduction

The University of Newcastle is committed to enhancing the availability and quality of its online course offerings to increase flexibility for students in all programs. Like many institutional aspirational documents, the University's Strategic Plan includes as a core aim, to provide an advanced curriculum and outstanding scholarly teaching that inspires and transforms our students (University of Newcastle, 2006). A significant challenge associated with achieving this aim is to spread the online message to colleagues involved in course development and administration. The Educational Resources Support and Development (ERSD) team in the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) plays a central role in addressing the challenge.

In this paper, we outline the program of strategically-targeted development activities we have implemented using a capacity-building approach to provide staff across the University with a range of opportunities for skill development and confidence enhancement. Our suite of activities focus on facilitating online learning, online teaching and online assessment, and on the development of online and multimedia resources that can be integrated in their course curricula.

Background

Prior to 2007, the University offerings in online teaching and learning were relatively few in number. Support for online learning and teaching was provided within a “production house” model that was ignorant of pedagogy, unrelated to course curricula, and relatively ad hoc; the benefits flowed to only a select few.

In response to the need to increase the number and quality of courses offered online or in a blended mode of delivery, we have formulated a three-pronged strategic approach and an associated comprehensive suite of activities that seek to build capacity of both inexperienced and experienced staff.

Theoretical Framework

The approach we have adopted has been deliberately designed to encourage academic staff to view their courses in a more holistic way in which relevant activities, assessment tasks and resources are integrally aligned and systematically embedded. Our approach is informed by the theoretical and research literature on capacity building pedagogy and by the theories of adult learning and social learning. This theoretical framework forms the foundation of our enabling approach that supports staff to develop skills in the design and facilitation of online learning environments.

Capacity-building pedagogies often inform school reform processes (Fullan, 2000; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Youngs & King, 2002) and form the basis of commonly used approaches in the field of health (Jackson et al., 1994; Poole, 1997) and community development field (Eade, 1997). In higher education contexts, capacity-building governance models enable institutions to independently implement quality assurance and sustainability actions (Rupert, 2001; Symes, 2005). Capacity-building models can enable academic staff to facilitate engaging online learning experiences for their students and to design online courses and resources which are relevant and customised (Harasim, 2000). The academic staff development approach outlined in this paper is strongly underpinned by these capacity-building pedagogies. They are used to empower academic staff to facilitate high quality online learning experiences and to create engaging, interactive resources for the University’s students.

According to the tenets of adult learning theory, or androgogy (Knowles, 1990), staff members can be supported to progress from a state of possible dependency through to a state of self-direction. As a consequence of this process, staff become capable of autonomously solving problems associated with online learning environments. This approach to academic staff development leads staff to a point where they can independently create resources and design learning experiences for

students in their online courses. During the capacity-building process of supporting staff to develop their own online learning and teaching skills, staff in the ERSD team deliberately lead by example to demonstrate varied methods of online course design and facilitation techniques. This process adopts modelling as a method of learning, based on Bandura's (1977; 1986) theory of social learning. This theory complements the underlying capacity-building model that drives the practical implementation of the approach outlined in this paper.

Three-Pronged Approach to Academic Staff Development

Our three-pronged approach to academic staff development in the areas of online learning and teaching has been made possible by our strategic harnessing of the broadly-based skills, talents and interests of staff in the CTL's Educational Resources Support and Development (ERSD) team. The approach has enabled the ERSD team to be, and be seen to be, leaders and to model for academic staff the quality learning experiences that they can in turn provide for our students, especially in the online environment.

Our approach involves the implementation of three strategic initiatives:

- a comprehensive series of online and technology-supported learning and teaching course and workshop offerings;
- web-based and other online resource development; and
- publications and drop-in sessions that increase awareness and assist in the development of an appreciation of the opportunities provided by engaging and pedagogically sound online experiences for quality student learning.

Course and Workshop Offerings

Consistent with a capacity-building model, a workshop series has been designed to enable staff to develop skills in the facilitation of online learning and the development of online courses. The workshops are both generic and customised to suit specific faculty- or school-based needs. The workshops are practical and interactive in nature, using materials that are underpinned by sound pedagogical guidelines relevant to online learning and teaching contexts in higher education. During these workshops, staff are provided with opportunities to explore a range of online learning and teaching examples. As well as offering a series of workshops about online learning and teaching, with later follow-up workshops, the team also designed and facilitated a number of customised workshops for various Faculties throughout the University.

Online Learning Workshop Series. The suite of workshops designed to support staff develop online teaching skills cover nine areas of development (see Table 1) and cater for both experienced and inexperienced staff.

Table 1: Online Learning Workshop Series

Workshop type	Workshop titles
Getting started	1) Getting started in online learning
Facilitating online learning	2) Designing online learning activities 3) Designing online assessment
Effective online course design	4) Online course design 5) Converting current courses to online contexts 6) Quality assurance in online learning
Integrating multimedia into online courses	7) Using graphics in online learning contexts 8) Using audio in online learning contexts 9) Using video in online learning contexts

Follow-up workshops. Feedback gathered from staff who have attended workshops has indicated the need for follow-up workshops to supplement the work being done as a result of the Online Learning Workshop Series. So, to enable previous participants the opportunity to share their online teaching skills and resources with other colleagues at the University, the following two types of workshops have been added to the workshop offerings outlined in Table 1:

- follow-up session for course design, course conversion and quality assurance workshops.
- follow-up session for graphics, audio, video workshops.

These follow-up workshops have enabled staff from a range of faculties across the University to benefit by exploring each other's online course examples. Due to their informal and collaborative nature, these workshops have frequently resulted in fruitful discussions about how to solve commonly encountered challenges in online learning environments. In these workshops, the facilitators model how learning can be facilitated rather than "delivered" and how resources can be created by those teaching in online courses rather than produced in a "production house" model.

Customised workshops. At times, staff in various faculties and divisions request workshops that are customised to suit their specific needs. In these cases, workshops such as the following are designed and facilitated:

- Using rubrics for assessment and learning for staff from Wollotuka (School of Aboriginal Studies)
- Using the Virtual Classroom function within Blackboard in online courses to support synchronous communication between students and lecturers. This workshop was requested by the staff in the Joint Medical Program in the Faculty of Health.
- Using Blackboard's GradeCentre for staff from the School of Nursing and Midwifery.

Feedback from staff who attend these workshops indicates they appreciate the opportunity provided in the workshops to solve problems within a supportive environment as a faculty or school group. Such workshops often involve a collaboration between Faculty and CTL staff to explore and solve issues that occur in online learning environments. Examples shared in these sessions often become the focus of later workshops in the Online Learning Workshop Series and the Follow-up Workshop Series. This style of workshop enables a collaborative approach to be adopted and modelled for all staff involved.

Web-based and Other Online Resource Development

We have worked closely with staff across the University to develop online resources for staff and students that support online learning and teaching; and support Faculty staff to design and create their own resources that can be embedded in their online courses.

By modelling a capacity-building approach to online resource development (Northcote & Huon, 2009), we have developed a Framework for Online Resource Development. Using this Framework, the ERSD team have worked together with other CTL and Faculty staff to create these resources:

- Learning in the online environment (launched August 2008);
- Diagnostic Academic English Language Test (DAELT) (currently being launched); and
- Teaching in the online environment (currently under construction).

To support high quality online and technology-supported learning and teaching at the University, the Centre for Teaching and Learning staff have used their combined expertise in online teaching and learning to design, develop and distribute these three online resources.

Learning in the online environment (LOE). This web-based resource has been designed to assist commencing students to become effective learners in online and technology-supported learning environments (Huon, Northcote et al., 2009).

The resource has three core modules:

- Module 1 encourages students to consider what it means to be a learner at university and the implications of using technology for learning in today's world.
- Module 2 is a virtual tour through a range of available information and communication technologies, with reflections on how best to capitalise on such technologies for learning.
- Module 3 introduces students to the online learning environment at the University of Newcastle (that is, Blackboard).

The resource has been accessed more than 2000 times per month since it was launched in August 2008. Its success can be measured from the evaluation data gathered about this resource that reflects students' appreciation of the self-paced, accessible and interactive nature of the resource.

Teaching in the online environment. This web-based resource is currently in the design phase, in consultation with Faculty staff. The resource will support staff in the use of online teaching and learning technologies. Early consultation with Faculty staff indicates they prefer a resource that includes an easily accessible collection of topics about online teaching, with supporting guidelines and case studies. This resource is currently in development and will be launched at the beginning of the second semester in 2009.

Online Diagnostic Academic English Language Test (DAELT). In collaboration with colleagues in the CTL's Learning Support team, we have developed this resource to better inform academic teaching staff about the English language needs of their students (Dennis, Stratilas, Yardy, & Huon, 2009; Huon, Dennis, Stratilas, & Yardy, 2009). The resource specifically targets the learning needs of non English-speaking background International students. This post entrance test has been developed and made available to a wide group of Faculties in 2009. The DAELT serves to emphasise the importance of the ability to communicate successfully as a core graduate attribute and as a University-wide responsibility.

Supporting faculty staff to design and create their own resources. By supporting staff to understand the design principles involved in the development of online resources, the staff themselves become the resource designers and developers, rather than depending on an external consultancy to create resources for them. The other major advantage to this capacity-building approach to supporting academic staff, is that academic staff are then empowered to embed

these resources in their own online courses. In this way, staff are in the prime position to provide students with the rationale for using and interacting with these resources in their online courses. Additionally, when students provide feedback to staff about these online resources, staff are in an ideal position to either modify the resources to suit specific course or discipline contexts. As a result, staff are able to acquire resource development skills and they also have the benefit of embedding these resources into their online courses in a relevant and authentic way. By being involved in a range of activities that support staff to create online educational resources including graphics, audio and video components, staff have developed resources for use in complementary therapies, music education, art education and community services research courses.

Publications and Drop-in Sessions

To increase awareness of the opportunities provided by sound online experiences and to enhance appreciation of their contribution to high quality student learning, a range of publications have been designed and a suite of informal drop-in sessions have been offered to staff. These publications and drop-in sessions have been distributed and facilitated to provide staff with an additional way in which to access support for their online learning and teaching.

Principles for Teaching, Learning and Assessment. Staff in the CTL have also led the University in formulating the University of Newcastle *Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment*, and the *Principles that Should Guide Practice in Online Assessment*. These two policy documents have been endorsed by the University Senate and are incorporated into on-campus and online workshops and activities facilitated by staff in the CTL.

Publications. To provide the University with regularly communicated information about their activities, the CTL publishes an annual report of teaching and learning activities. This report provides a detailed account, along with evaluations, of the Centre's activities. In addition to this annual report, other regular publications are distributed throughout the University including newsletters, brochures and bookmarks.

Drop-in sessions. Drop-in sessions are regularly facilitated throughout each semester to provide opportunities for staff to gain specific and timely advice about online learning and teaching. During these sessions, members of the ERSD team are available to work with academic staff on particular online teaching and learning issues as nominated by staff who attend the session. These sessions enable staff to explore the range of online learning and teaching technologies available at the University of Newcastle in a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. Staff are encouraged to drop-in at any time during this two hour period.

University-wide events. We have conducted a small number of University-wide events that have played a critical role in culture change. In particular, *Showcasing Online Learning and Teaching* was designed to increase the profile of online learning and teaching at the University. In addition to this event for staff, University-wide events for students also focus on online teaching and learning issues. For example, during February and March 2009, staff from the CTL facilitated sessions for new first year students and students in Open Foundation courses to assist them to become familiar with online and technology-supported learning and teaching contexts. These activities and events are planned in a way that promotes a community of practice model of collaboration for both staff and students at the University.

Showcasing internal University expertise. To encourage other University staff to develop their own online educational resources, ongoing opportunities are provided for staff to demonstrate and share their own expertise in online learning and teaching. Large university-wide events provide a context in which online learning and teaching exemplars can be demonstrated and discussed. Ongoing Follow-up workshops also enable staff to demonstrate how they use skills developed during the Online Learning Workshop Series to other colleagues.

Our Reflections

Overall, our new approach to supporting academic staff in their online learning and teaching endeavours has been met with a very positive response from academic staff in the faculties across the University. Administrative staff across various divisions in the University have also been regular participants in the range of support activities offered for staff. Our paper concludes with the achievements and challenges we have faced.

Achievements

Our achievements have covered a range of leadership, operational, and teaching and learning practice changes.

Leadership. We now provide strong leadership in and modelling of the principles and practices of online and technology-supported learning and teaching by staff in The Centre for Teaching and Learning.

Engagement. Attendance at workshops and general feedback from workshops have been positive. There is high engagement by participants during workshops due to customised, interactive and collaborative activities used during these sessions.

Reputation. Due to an increased recognition of our contribution, we have received increased requests for customised workshops as the team's reputation spreads.

Collaboration. We now enjoy strong collaborative partnerships with some staff in Faculties within the University. For example, collaborative research projects on blended learning, online curriculum development and online student assessment are currently underway. We look forward to this continued collaboration between Faculty and CTL staff to develop resources, facilitate workshops and implement University-wide events that promote the effective use of technology-supported online teaching and learning within online courses and courses with online components.

Consultation. Staff and students across the University have been regularly consulted and involved in the process of designing resources, planning activities and organising workshops. This consultation ensures that the support we provide is tailored to the needs and interests of staff and students at the University.

Connections. We have observed positive responses when staff are invited to share their online learning and teaching expertise with other colleagues in workshops, drop-in session and University-wide events. This recognition of staff within the University ensures that effective teaching and learning practices are acknowledged, valued and showcased.

Resources. We are involved in the ongoing development of University-wide resources that support the advancement of and innovation in online and technology-supported learning and teaching at the University. The development of support resources is ongoing and they are regularly incorporated into online resources and workshops. At times, they are used by staff as self-paced instructional modules. Examples of these resources include printed and electronic booklets, online Blackboard courses that support on-campus workshops, tip sheets, case studies, course exemplars, instructional guides and animated instructional videos.

Variety. We have strong support for the varied activities we offer and for the way in which we can facilitate support activities in a range of venues and across a range of campuses. To enable this strong support program, we offer workshops in the CTL, workshops in Faculty locations, online support, daily support through phone, email and face-to-face interactions with staff, customised advice about using multimedia in teaching and a range of printed material.

Research. Our team is now actively involved in providing ongoing support for research into online learning and teaching issues, including the design and evaluation of online educational resources.

Challenges Encountered

Throughout the process of implementing the new capacity-building approach for academic staff development in the areas of online learning and teaching, some challenges have been encountered.

Spread. Some faculties have been more involved than others.

Attitudes. Longstanding school staff continue to ask that we produce resources for their teaching. Some understand that the CTL has changed its functions whereas another small group would like the old style “production house” approach to be revived.

Recommendations for the Future

In consideration of both the achievements and the challenges encountered, a set of recommendations has been identified for future development of this academic support program.

Evaluation. We plan to continue to the systematic evaluation of online and technology-supported learning and teaching through online evaluation tools.

Further collaboration. We plan to extend to extend the amount of collaborative projects involving both CTL and Faculty staff across the University in order to further investigate online teaching and learning issues.

Policy. We plan to make recommendations to review policies related to online teaching and learning in the University. When it is clear that new policies are necessary, for example, in the use of social networking tools and emerging Web 2.0 technologies, we will provide advice to University policy making bodies and relevant teaching and learning committees.

Online workshops. Existing versions of on-campus workshops in online learning and teaching are being converted to online contexts for remotely located staff and staff at non-Callaghan campuses. We are currently consulting with Faculty staff about the possibility of facilitating more workshops within Faculty locations, in addition to central CTL locations.

Conclusion

The impact of this strategic implementation of a capacity-building approach to academic staff development is growing. Feedback from staff and students at the University indicate that this approach is having wide ranging effects on student learning and academics’ teaching and course design skills. By enabling academic staff to develop online facilitation and resource development skills, they can tailor

their online courses to provide interactive and flexible online learning experiences for students at the University.

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