

Organizing eLearning in a Campus-Based University: Communities, Cultures and Complementarities

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Abstract:

As in many other campus-based universities, the use of eLearning in the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has been growing steadily since 2000, at about 30% a year. Now a qualitative change is emerging, in new forms of organized support for eLearning. The accumulation of activity by individual teachers is becoming organized at the institutional level.

There was already central support for individual early adopters of eLearning, and also a few Faculty or Programme-based support units, some well organized. By 2004 the growth in use of eLearning reached the point where an upgrade to the infrastructure and the support services was needed. With this came an opportunity to review and develop the eLearning support, and to take advantage of new software tools.

Creating an organized, coherent eLearning system has involved technical project management, but only as one component. Overall it has been an iterative process of systemic adaptation – neither totally planned top-down nor completely self-organized bottom-up, but a complex mix of both. There have been clashes of departmental culture and misunderstandings to be resolved between IT infrastructure specialists and other service providers. Communities of practice made new connections across organizational boundaries and prepared the ground for new ways of working. There were formal consultations with heads of academic departments and committees. There were debates about priorities and funding allocation. Individuals and departments resisted change, sometimes with good cause. Administrative rules and practices were challenged. Established workaround practices were exposed. No one person or group has been in control and the leadership roles have been distributed and shifting.

Yet we are beginning to see a coherent institutional eLearning system that is in tune with strategic priorities. Existing eLearning users have transferred to the new learning management system. Departments are organized as groups within which staff are taking on specialized roles, sharing resources and using templates to improve quality and save development time. New groups of users are coming on board. There is one contact point for networked central and local helpdesks, providing a range of user support services. Perhaps most significantly, we are now beginning to formalize ways of dealing with future upgrades, both in terms of technical change management and in terms of communicating and negotiating with users.

This paper interprets these changes in UNSW's eLearning environment in terms of complex adaptive systems models, drawing on related research in non-university organizational contexts. In particular, the role of diversity and complementarities as part of systemic organizational adaptation explains why some tensions and apparent contradictions will always remain, and that this is a good thing. The resulting insights may help other universities who are also seeking to develop a coherent and effective eLearning service, and are finding that things don't always go according to plan.