AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO EMBEDDING QUALITY IN E-LEARNING: DEVELOPING STAFF CAPACITY AT UWS

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Abstract:

At the University of Western Sydney, 90% of its undergraduate programs have e-learning sites. Whilst this indicates high usage, reviews of sites have shown variable quality of sites. The university, despite managing the e-learning system centrally, has never adopted a prescriptive, top down templated approach to the development of sites. Rather, staff have been expected to use the staff development opportunities to learn how to develop quality sites and how to incorporate the technology into their teaching practice. This approach has resulted in some excellent e-learning sites as well as some poor quality sites.

The recent upgrade of our e-learning system (LMS) involved a significant change to the suite of e-learning tools available for staff to use, including access to the range of Web 2.0 technologies. Once the transition to the new infrastructure had been completed there was a strategic decision to focus on improving the quality of e-learning sites.

The Teaching Development Unit, as the central unit managing the e-learning system, initiated an institutional project, Developing Quality e-Learning Sites, to implement this strategic decision.

The project adopted a distributed, bottom-up approach to improving the quality of e-learning sites through developing staff capabilities and engagement with the process. Whilst it was important to have the support of the University leaders for the project, the process focussed on using fellow travellers to engage academic staff in both the development and implementation of e-learning standards. This tiered approach to involving stakeholders assured better take-up of the initiative and helped ensure ongoing sustainability of the quality assurance process.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Western Sydney (UWS), similarly to most other universities, has over several years invested in the uptake of e-learning as a fundamental principle of contemporary teaching in Higher Education. It has adopted a centralised learning management system (LMS), integrated the system with other university systems (eg student information system), implemented regular LMS upgrades, invested heavily in additional IT infrastructure, and has provided staff development for academics to help them make optimal use of the features available in the LMS.

While these investments are necessary in an enterprise wide adoption of a LMS, there is inconsistency in the quality of e-learning across all teaching areas. There is not a templated approach to designing and developing e-learning environments at the university and academic staff are not required by policy to undertake staff development in e-learning. Academic staff themselves acknowledge that the quality of e-learning environments vary within their Schools. Staff in the central academic development unit also acknowledge the variation in quality based on reviews on random samples of sites, and project based curriculum re-design work for blended learning. Student feedback in university surveys has indicated that students are also aware of the variation in quality of e-learning environments.

In order to focus on improving the quality of e-learning, the central academic development unit decided in 2007 to develop a strategic plan to embed quality e-learning practices across the institution from 2008. This plan evolved into an institutional wide project to develop Basic and Advanced Standards that academics would be able to quickly use to self review their e-learning sites and access support and resources to help improve the quality of their sites. Therefore it was necessary to engage a range of stakeholders whose participation would be critical to implementing the desired change in current teaching practices. The stakeholders ranged from senior executives, academic leaders, teaching academics and e-learning specialists from the central unit.

The challenge was to institute an organisational change in a large multi-campus university and to embed the new quality measures in a way that was sustainable and non-threatening to staff. According to Marshall (2004) a whole of enterprise approach is required to embed sustainable quality in e-learning. The literature on organisational change highlights that the desired change can only occur in specific circumstances; that is the change must be led, must engage key stakeholders at the different levels across the organisation, and be supported by operational procedures and processes to ensure sustainability of the change in teaching practices (Scott, 1999, 2008, Dawson 2001, Garrison & Anderson, 2003, Holt, 2001).

This paper examines the aims and implementation strategy of the ‘Developing Quality e-Learning Sites’ project initiated and lead by the central academic development unit. This project commenced in February 2008 and will continue at least until the end of 2009. The paper provides some contextual information about the processes for supporting e-learning at the university and drawing on the literature of organisational change, outlines the ‘distributed strategic approach’ adopted and the preliminary thoughts about the challenges and successes.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Western Sydney is a large multi-campus university with an enterprise wide e-learning system (Blackboard Campus Edition) centrally managed by an academic development unit called the Teaching Development Unit (TDU). Over 90% of the university's undergraduate subjects have an e-learning site and the system is used by 35,000 students and 1,800 staff as part of their day-to-day activities. While these figures indicate high usage and large uptake of e-learning to support teaching and learning activities, reviews of sites have shown variability in quality.

The university has never adopted a prescriptive top down templated approach to the development of e-learning sites, even though the system is centrally managed and supported. Rather, staff have been expected to use the staff development opportunities such as workshops, clinics, user group sessions and self help resources (ie user guides, interactive tutorials and reference sheets) to learn how to develop quality sites and how to incorporate the technology into their teaching practice. Staff participation in staff development sessions is not compulsory.

The Teaching Development Unit offers curriculum redesign support as well as a comprehensive staff development program modelling good practice in blended learning. The staff development sessions include LMS features and capabilities such as designing for communication, presenting and managing content, designing and managing assessment activities, and using the administrative features in the LMS for efficient class management. These sessions are actively attended by academics but attendance is not a requirement for teaching staff and therefore it is typically the staff who want guidance on improving the quality of their e-learning environments who attend.

Student feedback is one powerful indicator about quality (Scott, 2003) and most university staff would agree that students are increasingly seeing themselves as consumers of education and as such are more and more likely to voice concerns about quality or perceived value for money. At UWS, students have rated their e-learning experiences highly in terms of importance and performance; however their qualitative comments have indicated a discerning view of the range of quality in site design.

In addition to listening to the student voice on e-learning experiences, a small study was conducted by the central academic development unit looking at the characteristics of e-learning sites at the university. A random selection of undergraduate and postgraduate sites in the Spring sessions of 2006 and 2007 confirmed student views that there was variability in quality across e-learning sites. However, the study also confirmed that there were rich and complex ways in which e-learning sites were being designed and that there were examples of good quality practice across the institution.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Developing Quality in e-Learning Sites project aimed to develop the skills and knowledge of academic staff in designing quality e-learning sites through a scaffolded set of standards. The Basic Standards reference good design principles and includes a self-review framework for staff to use to evaluate the quality of sites and easily access developmental strategies to improve their sites. The Advanced Standards provide a pedagogical framework for designing quality e-learning environments that foster student engagement and interactivity in a blended learning context.

The Basic Standards is a simple and easy to use self-review framework supported by a peer review process to enable staff to meet good design principles. The self-review framework consists of the following four basic standards, each of which has associated criteria:

> Organisation and Appearance emphasises principles that support easy to follow structure and appearance of the site (eg "Site design promotes ease of navigation")
> Consistency and Compliance emphasises institutional and legal aspects such as copyright, privacy and currency of information (eg "Resources are appropriately linked to avoid Copyright infringements ")
> Appropriate Use of Tools focuses on effective use and management of tools (eg "Tools added have a clear purpose and rationale")
> Learner Resources and Supports focuses on providing supports and resources to students (eg "Links to learning supports are contained in the site")

Using the self-review framework staff can evaluate and rate their site against the criteria in the Basic Standards. Each standard has a rationale to help staff understand the design principles, as well as a set of development strategies and resources to help staff improve the quality of their sites. The project team also developed a site in the LMS to support the roll out of the Basic Standards and all staff at the university have access to the site. This site demonstrates good and bad design examples to illustrate each criterion in the Basic Standards as well as modelling good practice in what a compliant site looks and functions like.

A MULTI-TIERED APPROACH TO EMBEDDING QUALITY IN E-LEARNING

The literature in organisational change, particularly in university contexts, focuses on either top down or bottom up approaches (Cummings et al, 2005). A top down approach can be perceived by staff as punitive, unconsultative and policy heavy which can result in employee resistance to change, whereas a bottom up approach is a more organic change to practice involving the teaching academics in the "democratic decision making processes" (Cummings et al, 2005, p5). In addition, these authors argue that the organisational change models are missing a third approach, the middle out approach, which involves the middle management layer

leading the change process, as the central unit did for this project. The unique position of the central unit is that it operates between the "individualised interests of the teaching staff and the more strategic focus of senior staff" (Cummings et al, 2005, p11).

Drawing on the literature, the central unit at the university chose to adopt a multi-tiered approach as the process to embed quality in e-learning across the enterprise. This tiered strategic approach to involving stakeholders was intended to assure better take-up of the initiative and help ensure ongoing sustainability of the quality assurance process.

Engaging stakeholders

In order to engage with key academic leaders within the university, the central unit established an Advisory Group chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning to oversee the project. The membership of the Advisory Group consisted of Associate Deans from each College (top-down approach), seconded academics (bottom up approach), the Head of the Teaching Development Unit, the E-Learning Manager and support staff from other areas of the university such as the Library (middle out approach). The Advisory Group met regularly to discuss the developing standards and provide input into the plans to pilot the Basic Standards in three schools.

The purpose of the Advisory Group was to give senior backing to the initiative and provide institutional perspectives back to the project team regarding development and implementation. Dawson (2001) notes that "change involves political activity in dealing with opponents and building support for the initiative" (p12). Engaging these senior academic leaders is vital in brokering resistance of staff and highlighting the importance of the new practices for quality in teaching and learning. Cummings et al (2005) also argue that a middle out approach to implementing change minimises employee resistance, and Scott (2008) notes that motivation and engagement of stakeholders is crucial in achieving the desired change in practice.

The formation of the Advisory Group with its diverse membership was intended to improve the capacity of this project to be implemented more broadly across the university. The different profiles of the members of the Advisory Group provided a forum in which issues about compliance and staff monitoring of sites were addressed. These discussions helped determine the approaches adopted in implementation and the Advisory Group proved to be effective in disseminating information through the members' communication channels.

Practitioners as collegial leaders of change

Change management literature uses terms like champions (Cummings et al, 2005) and fellow travellers (Scott, 2003) to identify the role played by stakeholders in bringing about organisational change. The Teaching Development Unit took a strategic decision to engage practitioners (key stakeholders), ie teaching academics, as 'collegial leaders' with the imprimatur to co-develop and then implement the Basic Standards within schools.

In early 2008, the Teaching Development Unit seconded three teaching academics part time into the central unit to develop the Basic Standards, work closely with staff from their schools in obtaining feedback and implement the Basic Standards as collegial leaders alongside their fellow practitioners. These staff had experience in designing quality e-learning environments and were well known to the central unit from their roles in 2007 in providing on-campus mentoring to colleagues during the upgrade to the LMS. As a support initiative associated with the upgrade these three academics provided mentoring to fellow academics to help them transition to the new user interface and engage with the new teaching and learning tools available in the upgraded version of the LMS.

The central unit were aware that these staff were well regarded by their peers as having skills in designing quality e-learning environments and experience as teaching academics incorporating blended learning in their units and courses. The secondment process also enabled the central unit to have key links with the three Colleges of the university for the pilot of the project and implementation of quality standards.

The seconded academics led the pilot phase of the Basic Standards in three schools. Prior to commencing the pilot, the seconded academics themselves assessed their own e-learning sites against the Basic Standards and followed through the associated development strategies to ensure that all of their sites were compliant. They also peer reviewed each others' sites. Therefore when they met with individual and small groups of staff in the schools to discuss the Basic Standards, they were able to share their own experiences in self-reviewing their own sites. As practitioners, individually and collectively, these seconded academics were effective as collegial leaders in piloting the Basic Standards.

Implementation phase: Pilot study

After the Basic Standards had been developed and peer reviewed by the Advisory Group, the collegial leaders led a pilot with staff from three schools. Creating small clusters of staff to trial the Basic Standards allowed the collegial leaders to be a part of the culture of the school and support the academics in making the changes to their teaching practice. Buckley (2002) and Cummings et al (2005) note that creating collaborative groups to implement change contributes to the overall change in institutional culture and practice. These authors also note that creating small clusters allows issues such as workload and individual interest (or resistance) to using new technologies to support learning to be addressed.

In launching the pilot, the Head of the Teaching Development Unit contacted the Heads of three Schools informing them of the project to improve quality in e-learning and invited them to nominate staff to participate in the pilot. The response from the Heads of School was positive and each one gave their endorsement to the project being implemented in their school. The Heads of School were also informed that there was high-level leadership behind the initiative, ie the Advisory Group. Each seconded academic from the central unit was assigned a School to work with for the pilot.

In the pilot of the Basic Standards, 21 sites were representative of different levels of designer competencies, level of unit (ie 100 to 700) and level of reliance on the e-learning system (ie web supported, web dependent) were self-reviewed. Prior to the sites being self-reviewed and modified to meet the Basic Standards, a list of the sites were sent back to the central unit who then captured the appearance and structure of the site in a short screen cast. The purpose of this was to then reflect on how the sites had changed after staff had completed the self-review process.

Feedback from participants in the pilot confirmed that the self-review documentation, process and criteria were fairly simple and easy to understand, and that the process took only a short time to complete: on average 20 minutes, across all Schools. The more inexperienced academics reported that the Basic Standards were approachable, non-threatening and easy to follow, and the more advanced users found them meaningful to use.

The strong emphasis on self-review for improving quality in e-learning was not seen as punitive or imposed on academic staff and incorporating peer review was intended to bring about a major cultural shift in e-learning understanding and practice. In fact, one of the seconded academics reported to the Advisory Group that "the reflective process prompted some participants to more deeply analyse and critique their site and consider how they could go beyond the Basic Standards to use the LMS to improve the quality of their teaching." (Correia, pers.comm.) This statement was echoed by the other seconded academics and indicated that the multi-tiered approach was possibly resulting in a more qualitative assessment by academics than may otherwise have been realised through a top down or bottom up approach.

The self-review component of the Basic Standards, coupled with developmental strategies and resources to assist staff in improving the quality of their sites, are intended to promote self sufficiency in the process of evaluating and improving e-learning quality at UWS. This leads to sustainability in practice (Buckley 2002).

The pilot of the Basic Standards confirmed that staff found the self-review framework easy to use and that in most cases e-learning sites were largely compliant with only minor modifications required to make them 100% compliant. The pilot, which occurred in Autumn semester 2008, included a feedback and evaluation process to refine the Basic Standards before they were implemented. However, the timing of the release of the Basic Standards occurred in July, a time when already busy academics are focussed on getting their Spring unit sites and materials ready for the impending teaching session. The Advisory Group were reluctant to hold off on the release of the Basic Standards to later in the Semester because that would coincide with the planned release of the Advanced Standards.

Implementation phase: Institutional adoption

The Basic Standards were officially launched in Spring semester 2008. The timeline for implementation is until the end of 2009, so this paper reports on the initial aspects of the implementation of the Basic Standards.

The key stakeholders on the Advisory Group encouraged engagement with the Basic Standards within their work areas and messages were sent to academic staff from

the Associate Deans Academic, Heads of Schools and the Head of the Teaching Development Unit. This top down approach provided the necessary drivers to indicate to academic staff that the initiative was supported and in the best interests of their students and the school (or college) that e-learning sites were compliant with the Basic Standards.

A dedicated support site in the LMS was created as a resource to showcase good and poor site design for each criteria in the Basic Standards. All staff were given student level access to this site at the time of the official launch. This site includes a discussion area for staff to share their experiences in using the Basic Standards or to seek assistance if they have any questions, and is monitored by the seconded academics on a simple roster system.

Following the launch of the Basic Standards, the seconded academics followed up with Heads of Schools to run information sessions and lead small groups in evaluating their sites against the Basic Standards. This is where we have seen partial take-up of the initiative. In a couple of schools the seconded academics have not been able to get traction to discuss the Basic Standards or an approach to implementing the Standards within the school. In addition to this, the dedicated LMS site is also showing a large percentage of staff have not accessed the site. A main challenge for the central academic development unit and the Advisory Group is maintaining the momentum gained in the pilot and generating interest more broadly across the institution in using the Basic Standards. One action already taken by the central unit to address this is to integrate the Basic Standards across all the staff development sessions provided to academic staff. There is still work to do though as the implementation is in its early stages.

In addition to the ongoing implementation of the Basic Standards, a set of Advanced Standards are being developed that incorporate pedagogical principles associated with good learning design. To enable staff to move from Basic Standards to Advanced Standards, a scaffolded process is being developed to help staff further develop their capacity and knowledge in e-learning design and development with sound underlying pedagogical principles.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Change management implies a purposeful effort to bring about change (Dawson, 2001; Scott, 1999, 2003; Marshall 2004, Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005). Milne and Dimock (2005) argue that developing quality e-learning environments should be planned in a strategic way and Holt (2001) states that implementing change must engage diverse stakeholders in multiple ways and address the varying adoption rate of e-learning by academics.

The intention with the Developing Quality in e-Learning Sites Project was to adopt a distributed, multi-tiered approach to improving the quality of e-learning sites through developing staff capabilities and engagement with the process. While it was important to have the support of the university leaders for the project, the process focussed on using collegial leaders to engage academic staff in both the development of the Basic Standards and the implementation. This tiered approach to

involving stakeholders was intended to assure better take-up of the initiative and help ensure ongoing sustainability of the quality assurance process.

Affecting change management in higher education has to address the common myths of: the knight on a white charger; the brute logic; the silver bullet and the one size fits all (Scott, 1999, p6). In addressing this, the central academic unit considered the role of leadership in a contemporary university and framed an enterprise approach to developing quality in e-learning through motivating and empowering staff at all levels, sharing knowledge about quality in e-learning from a set of Standards that had been developed with strong reference to literature, and finally, by challenging the status quo of teaching practice and enabling creativity (Dess and Picken 2000). This is consistent with Higgs and Rowland (2005) who argue that successful leadership comes from creating capacity within the organisation and that moving "from leader-centric, directive behaviours to more facilitating and enabling styles were associated with success" (p. 147). In addition they recommend organisations focus on creating an environment in which change can emerge and be sustained.

However, reviews of the take-up of the Basic Standards across the remaining schools in the university has indicated that adoption rate is slow, therefore it is unlikely that a change in teaching practices to embed quality in e-learning is having a wide spread impact across the university. Whilst we have taken a collegial, developmental, multi-tiered approach to embedding quality in e-learning, the adoption rate in using the Basic Standards has been disappointing. Therefore to continue to drive this needed change to teaching practices, there is a need to have a stronger top down approach in 2009.

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