

# Partnerships and collaboration: connecting areas of expertise and experience

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Recent developments to adopt and embed technology into the design of learning and teaching across the higher education sector in Australia have required institutional responses founded in collaborative, cross-boundary, and interdisciplinary practices. Dynamic partnerships are at the heart of Griffith University's Arts, Education and Law Group's strategy to address the challenging landscape within which our academic and general/professional staff work. This paper reports on the approaches and collaborative work strategies and practices established by the Group's Blended Learning Advisor (BLA) and Curriculum Consultant (CC) as they work with academics in the learning and teaching space. Partnerships have been a critical component of the leadership culture developed with the Group learning and teaching executive and committee; school learning and teaching committees; program teams/convenor; course teams/convenor; and individual academics during one-to-one consults. The approach adopted by the BLA and CC is to work with academic and general/professional staff to build capability; help staff find better ways to use relevant and appropriate learning and teaching IT; design solutions to tasks that can achieve multiple ends and deliver informed outcomes based on good practice. This is achieved because of the nature of the partnerships and the way the roles have developed over time.

## Introduction

During the twenty-first century, technology adoption in Higher Education has been sporadic with an emphasis placed, by institutions, on infrastructure and providing access to technologies for their users (Blin & Munro, 2008; Flavin, 2012; Kirkup & Kirkwood, 2005). It has been suggested that the sporadic nature of uptake is because these infrastructures were often deployed with little educational support for their academics and students to learn to use these technologies effectively (Zemsky & Massy, 2004). This lack of support may be a retrospective perception as the academics' attitudes towards themselves as teachers have changed, the types of support institutions have considered necessary have changed, and students and public perceptions have shifted. During the same period the provision of academic staff development and support (also known as educational development) has moved between central units; portfolios based in the disciplines and faculties; back to central units; and most recently a combination which locates support both in a central unit and distributed within the academic elements. Gibbs (2013) in his longitudinal study has identified changing delivery models of educational development and support, trends in functionality, and an evolving focus of activities. He notes a shifting focus from classroom to learning environment; from individual teachers to teaching teams; from teaching to learning; from individual change tactics to large change strategies; from quality assurance to quality enhancement with concurrent conceptual changes around learning as a social undertaking; learning theory underpinning change with evidence-based concepts; and organisational change that includes learning and teaching as part of the central decision-making process. Accordingly, expertise of the academic and general/professional staff in the units and element portfolios range across assessment, curriculum design, pedagogy, blended and online learning, and evaluation and they undertake a broad gamut of activities that focus on the high-level strategic initiatives that are aimed at whole-of-institution change through to the individual course-based change tactics.

## Utilising university networks and creating partnerships

Griffith University is one such example of the combined central and distributed models of educational development, which we contend is proving effective in closing the gap on technology adoption and improving the overall quality of our learning and teaching environment. Briefly, the learning and teaching space at Griffith is structured as follows. There are four academic groups: Arts, Education and Law; Business; Health; and Science. Within those Groups are the discipline-based schools and colleges. In

2010 the University appointed to each Group a Blended Learning Advisor and a Curriculum Consultant to work with academics in a local, close-to-the-discipline approach that was to supplement the activities of the centrally-based (and university-wide) educational development unit. Each Group is led by its Pro Vice Chancellor who in turn is supported by a team of Deans, one of whom is the Dean, Learning and Teaching. It is in the learning and teaching portfolio that the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant are located. The Arts, Education and Law Group (AEL) consists of 8 schools and colleges across the disciplines of music, law, education, humanities, languages and linguistics, criminology and criminal justice, art, and film. Even though there is a mixture of elements called schools and colleges within the Group, the term “School” will henceforth be used to include both names. In line with University policy, in AEL there is a Group-level Learning and Teaching Committee and school learning and teaching committees (or equivalent). Each school also has a Deputy Head of School, Learning and Teaching (or equivalent) and those Deputy Heads are both members of the AEL Learning and Teaching Committee and Chairs of their respective school committees. Together with the Dean Learning and Teaching, Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant, and Group Finance Resource Manager they form the core of the AEL learning and teaching leadership group.

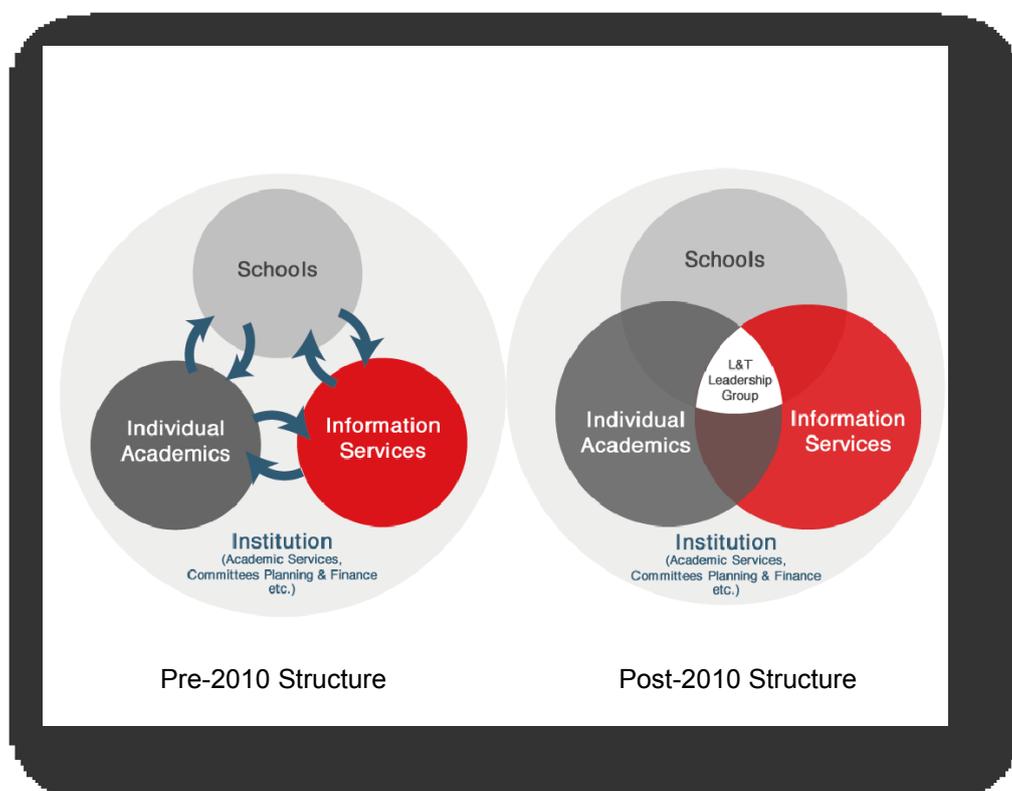


Figure 1. Spheres of Influence

Within this structure, colleagues work collaboratively in what Whitchurch (2008) calls the “third space” of higher education where boundaries between academic and general/professional staff roles are blurred—where knowledge, expertise and experience from both domains is brought together and used irrespective of its originating source “mirroring the process by which disciplinary boundaries are broken down in interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production” (p. 387).

While Whitchurch (2008) was able to define four domains or identity and function for roles across the areas of human resource management, student support, external relations and planning and statistics this paper includes additional roles that may have more traditionally been described as academic development (Land, 2004; Land & Barnett, 2008), and library and information roles (Corrall & Lester, 1996; Habel, 2009; Shepley, 2009). Whitchurch (2008) discovered that staff within the third space “build their credibility on a personal basis” but do so through relationships inside, across and outside their university

(p. 394). Furthermore, that credibility and authority comes about due to the institutional knowledge they accumulate and the strength of the day-to-day partnerships formed.

So for AEL, the third space of learning and teaching enhancement is inhabited by academic colleagues in the roles of Dean, Learning and Teaching; Deputy Heads of School, Learning and Teaching as members of the AEL Learning and Teaching Committee and Chairs of their respective school learning and teaching committees; convenors of programs (degrees) and courses (subjects/units); and general/professional staff in the roles of Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant and Educational Designer. Important relationships outside that group, but critical to its functioning are the centrally-located discipline librarians; the Group Finance Resource Manager; the Program Services Officer in Academic Administration; information services colleagues who look after the University's LMS and other educational technologies; and planning and statistics officers.

Fundamental to the partnerships in AEL is the sense that both academic and professional staff have knowledge, expertise, and experience that can be applied to learning and teaching to achieve positive outcomes. Given the diversity of disciplines exhibited within the Group, there is also the recognition that there are differences in disciplinary pedagogy and disciplinary cultures that help shape how teaching and learning is both talked about and changed (Gibbs, 2013).

## **Partnerships in action**

Like many other universities, Griffith has been for some time developing and implementing the technological infrastructure to support twenty-first century learning such as (but not limited to) its learning management system (LMS) with online course sites containing all content; online library interfaces and recorded course content either as a replacement for lectures (flipped classroom) or as a review tool supplementary to lectures. New IT platforms and processes have been adopted and implemented and, as discussed in the literature, offers the potential of three levels of change (Price & Kirkwood, 2011) by:

1. supporting existing teaching practices;
2. enhancing teaching through additional learning opportunities; and
3. transforming the landscape of learning and teaching through the design and delivery of learning experiences that were previously not possible.

The following discussion will use examples of practice that highlight how the partnerships created between AEL's Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant, the AEL learning and teaching leadership group and academic colleagues exhibit these three levels of change within the Group.

### **Level 1: Supporting existing teaching practices – using technology to be effective and efficient**

At this level of change, it is imperative that the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant work with academic staff in the Group, but also with centrally located general/professional staff who are involved in university-wide systems and IT infrastructure designed to support and enable learning and teaching on a large scale.

*Example: Using data to inform change* for both quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes has become a central element of the quality improvement cycle at Griffith over time. Central units have been collecting, collating and distributing Student Experience of Course (SEC) data to course/subject convenors and decisions over what needed to be responded to and acted on was, in large part, an individual decision on the part of the course/subject convenor. That has been changing at Griffith with the Group learning and teaching leadership group now involved due to the inclusion of SEC results being included as one of the reported and measured items in the University's Academic Plan. In AEL, the Curriculum Consultant had been collating the data from the course evaluation system to identify trends in SEC results tracking courses over time for both improvement and congratulatory purposes as per the University benchmarks. This data set now extends over five years of results and the reports generated are used by the Group Learning and Teaching Committee; the School Learning and Teaching Committees;

the Deputy Heads, Learning and Teaching; Course Convenors; and Curriculum Consultant in a partnership to make decisions over which courses need to be reviewed on the basis of the student feedback. What direction and form the review takes is also informed by the trend data which illustrates how that course has been received over time by students as well as its most recent iteration so that one result is not seen in isolation which has often been the case when reported only by the central unit. This is an important consideration and helps identify and shape the quality enhancement activities planned. Hence, using data collection and reporting methods more effectively and developing the partnerships around quality enhancement has allowed a tightly aligned response to an institutional (and sector-wide) teaching practice that improves the support available to the course convenor.

*Example: Adopting online recording of marks and their distribution to students* was a recent University decision that has changed the marking process for all teaching staff and has involved general staff in the Schools as well as the central information services staff and Blended Learning Advisors who have had to implement the MyMarks project and associated learning management system (LMS) procedures. While the implementation of the online marking process was a University decision stipulated in policy, its adoption and take-up has had to occur in the Groups and Schools. In AEL, an initial implementation plan was proposed by the Blended Learning Advisor and finalised at the Group Learning and Teaching Committee with input from all members on possible/probable impacts, support required, appropriate timelines and reporting methods discussed. The Blended Learning Advisor then conducted workshops for academic staff over a number of semesters and also worked individually with Course Convenors and teaching teams as requested. This approach meant the professional learning occurred in both a discipline-specific and course-specific manner that allowed academic staff to see how the system could and would work for them. Data tracking and reporting on the uptake of the online marking process by the Blended Learning Advisor has been an important task because there were University-wide time sensitive actions to be taken and implementation deadlines to be met. This hands-on approach by the Blended Learning Advisor meant that unforeseen system setting requirements and implementation difficulties were able to be identified quickly and solved through design and distribution of tip-sheets for academics and problem-solving discussions with the central information services staff responsible for the roll-out. Before the change management plan was implemented, usage of MyMarks within the Group ranged from 9% to 51%. In the two years since there has been an increase of usage ranging between 59% - 250% which shows that some schools made a concerted and consistent effort across the school as a whole to change their processes in line with the policy initiative, whereas others have not achieved the same whole-of-school results.

*Example: AEL's blended learning workshop series for implementing various educational technologies* has been conducted by the Blended Learning Advisor prior to the commencement of teaching each semester for five years. The series is designed to cover the key technology- and course-related administrative processes in a supportive environment and through a just-in-time delivery model. Experience has shown that academic staff most productively engage with both the technology and procedural aspects when they (a) need to use the technology and (b) are required to undertake particular tasks that are time sensitive. The interactive workshops are designed to support existing practices, introduce new practices and procedures, and highlight best practice to achieve both efficiencies and effectiveness. Workshops conducted in this just-in-time manner have seen registrations steadily growing in the last 4 years, and now has over 100 registrations each year.

## **Level 2: Enhancing teaching through additional learning opportunities**

When working at this level of change, the examples selected illustrate how the partnerships between the Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant and academics across the Group enhance teaching through activities that are characterised by peer-learning, change-agency and co-designing. Experience has shown that academics look to learn from each other and those with particular expertise in new educational technologies as part of the quality enhancement cycle. This provides opportunities for them to learn and subsequently provide positive change to their students' learning experiences.

*Example: Implementing the online feedback tool Turnitin* has been encouraged by the University as part of policy revisions and after an open-pilot approach at the University level in late 2013, its uptake has been approached in various ways across the Group. Some Schools have decided to use it across all their courses; some course convenors have decided to use it for their individual courses but across teaching

teams; while other individual academic staff have decided to adopt it for their marking and feedback purposes across the courses they teach. The support and educational development provided by the Blended Learning Advisor for the adoption of Turnitin built on the momentum (and lessons learned) from the MyMarks project and the University's open-pilot but has focussed on how Turnitin can enhance the assessment and feedback elements of teaching. The workshops and individual consultations undertaken by the Blended Learning Advisor include usage of, and reference to, an LMS-based organisation site that academics are enrolled in to access the resources produced by the Blended Learning Advisor. This site was developed in response to questions from staff wanting to know how they could try out the Turnitin product. The resources in the site include example assignments for practicing using Turnitin that are specific to the disciplines of the Group and sourced from academic colleagues for professional learning purposes. This mixed method of learning means staff can attend the introductory and interactive workshops face-to-face and in real time as well as use the online resources whenever it is convenient to practice and reinforce what they have learned prior to the live marking episodes of semester.

*Example: New workshop design and delivery embedded in the regular workshop series includes requests from academics and responses to new initiatives.* As the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant work with academic colleagues, new workshop ideas and need for resource production often emerge from discussions. The Blended Learning Advisor has formalised this in her "call for workshops" process whereby a menu option for the next session delivery is provided to staff and they are asked to (a) vote on which topics most interest them; (b) suggest new topics for workshops and (c) arrange workshops during semester for their teaching teams on a topic and time that suits them. This process involves the academic staff as active change agents in their own and colleagues' professional learning and educational development. It also represents a more agile way to conduct professional learning activities that central units cannot easily emulate due to their competing demands and distance from the academics.

*Example: Course site design for new programs (and program renewal)* are built through collaborative activities involving the Program Convenor, Course Convenors, teaching team members, Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant and Educational Designer. To create a common look-and-feel across the program for all course sites, the teams worked together to design sites that had a consistency and coherency for students and staff. Three programs in particular at masters level delivering either in an online only or blended learning mode (which includes both face-to-face and online aspects) were successfully developed by leveraging the expertise of all involved for curriculum, assessment, site design and learning interactivity. There is more to online and blended learning design than just uploading content and the collaborative approach to the program/course site design plan delivered sites with which the teaching staff were comfortable and confident using because it built their technical capabilities and pedagogical understanding around both design and maintenance of the sites. One of the many other benefits has been the development of a consistent course site design across the program that has fostered student familiarity with the learning environment, which has been an important aspect of their experience as many of them were new to online learning. The academic teams have noted that this team-based approach was rather innovative in process that they had not experienced before at a tertiary level. Additional benefit has been gained as academics involved in these discussions have taken the concepts into other courses and programs that they teach into.

*Example: Show and share* workshops in one of our Schools are designed to facilitate the colleague-to-colleague learning that is a valued practice amongst academics as part of either a formal, or informal, community of practice (Gibbs, 2013). In our experience, academics are willing to consider what their colleagues are doing and to explore what has worked for those colleagues. As such, the Learning and Teaching Committee in this School sponsors workshops facilitated by the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant that share blended and online learning success stories and policy updates that require or encourage change in the usage of educational technologies in learning design. The workshops, therefore, have a number of academics presenting their educational technology usage and some evaluation of the success of that usage. The Blended Learning Advisor also provides sessions for professional learning on new aspects of the University's LMS and the Curriculum Consultant works through the policy aspects and assessment design in the blended and online environments. An important aspect of this partnership model for educational development is the relevancy of the discipline-specific, School-based discussions and examples. Participants have commented how valuable they have found the connection between their discipline, what educational technology updates/changes were required and the pedagogical implications of that uptake and implementation.

### **Level 3: Transforming the landscape of learning and teaching**

Using educational technology to transform learning and teaching practices is the third phase identified by Price and Kirkwood (2011) and the aspect of change that Selwyn (2014) observes is yet to be adopted uniformly across the sector. Our experience at this level of change has illustrated that it is when program teams get together with a vision for their program design that their teaching strategies, design possibilities, and delivery options are transformed. At this point, they are both learning and leading the change. When it involves the whole team, a program can be changed and enhanced in ways not possible before. The examples selected for this section first highlight a learning and teaching opportunity designed specifically for our academic staff as the learners become leaders and the second illustrates our colleagues' uptake of both a developer/leader role in the change they helped bring about.

*Example: The AEL Designing Online Courses module* has been developed for academic staff across the Group by the Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant and Educational Designer to provide an holistic learning resource designed to help staff get started with the transition to online delivery of their courses. The module is located as an organisation site within the University's LMS and is accessible to all teaching staff of the Group. There are ideas about curriculum design, content delivery, engaging students, building a community, practical activities and developing assessment suitable to the online learning environment. It has been built based on the Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK)(Mishra & Koehler, 2006) and Community of Practice (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) frameworks to achieve multiple ends. Completing the activities provides academic staff with knowledge about good practices in teaching and learning online and creates outputs that academics need for delivery of their courses and University quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes such as mapping course and program learning outcomes; planning documents demonstrating the constructive alignment between learning activity and assessment throughout the course; setting up evaluation methods and templates for recording evidence for the regular improvement/review cycle. The development of this resource for AEL's academic staff has transformed the way in which educational development is made available to them by bringing together many aspects of professional learning that had been previously delivered in segmented, face-to-face sessions into a more holistic context that could be completed in one episode or in many shorter sessions at times convenient and relevant to the academic. It also provided the opportunity to create a learning environment for academics that was not teacher-centred (with the knowledge being held and imparted through individuals), but learner-centred because it could be designed to suit different levels of familiarity and mastery of content; in sub-module form through which staff could work as they needed to; and accessible when it was most beneficial to them. We have thus leveraged educational technology in a way not used before in the Group for this type of professional learning. Currently there are 112 academics enrolled in the site with 81 being active users and in 2014 courses designed under this framework had 2513 student enrolments.

*Example: Program Design, renewal and review processes that have leveraged the shared expertise* available between the program teams and the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant have created new ways of supporting and improving: the learning design and curriculum alignment of a program; learning activity design; consistent, enhanced student interface and interactive design elements; and pedagogical developments. This has occurred through facilitated design meetings, resource production, and program sites for the academic teams that serve as repositories and reference points for learning and teaching documents and resources that were produced for future use. The meetings were structured to bring key people together to collaborate on the task at hand and by having those key partners present it helped develop ways to talk about and visualise the curriculum and learning design in ways that put pedagogy across the program at the centre of considerations. This transformed thinking and conceptual links that could be made about learning and teaching alignment, curriculum mapping and curriculum progression to a programmatic level rather than the more isolated course level. While we used existing (and sometimes simple) technologies to create the maps and records to do this it has nevertheless resulted in a very different way of conceptualising the curriculum and methods of quality enhancement and assurance.

## Discussion

The roles of the Blended Learning Advisor and the Curriculum Consultant were established at a point in time as part of a University-wide shift from a centrally-provided and located professional development team, to one that added a distributed, but local to the discipline embedded approach. Since 2010, the value of the embedded nature of the roles has been recognised by AEL as it has taken on the full funding of the roles and made the positions continuing after the completion of the University-funded pilot. The AEL Dean Learning and Teaching, and the AEL Pro Vice Chancellor have both championed the roles and been advocates for the work undertaken to support the schools across the Group. The Blended Learning Advisor, Curriculum Consultant and Education Designer roles require particular, and somewhat specialised skill sets, knowledge base and experience that also has to be relevant to the disciplines represented in the Group. Part of the reason why the partnership with academic staff is successful is that it is evident that there is a close relationship between the specialist learning, teaching and technology knowledge and an understanding of the needs of the various disciplines across which our academic and professional staff work.

The roles were created at the same time as the AEL Group was established formally, together with the role of the Dean, Learning and Teaching, the inaugural Group Learning and Teaching Committee, the roles of Deputy Heads of School Learning and Teaching. The AEL roles were therefore embedded in a new structure from its inception, which has been beneficial to their visibility and reach across and into the schools. This has meant that from the start the Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant were able to focus on enabling improved capability and responsiveness across the learning and teaching portfolio as a collective and collegial effort rather than being brought in to address any one, single issue.

Having said that, each of the schools has maintained its identity and approach to learning and teaching with different ways of engaging academic and professional staff within their school, across the Group and the central elements of the University. Partnerships between the Blended Learning Advisor/Curriculum Consultant and school learning and teaching groups work best when the schools are actively involved with the implementation of strategies. A very important element to the successful transitions, uptakes and changes to procedure and education technology have been local sponsors or champions (both academic and professional staff) who engage others within the school and who reach out to colleagues across the Group.

Even though the AEL Blended Learning Advisor and Curriculum Consultant roles were established at the same time as the Group and therefore started in a new structure, each of the other three existing academic Groups across the University also appointed their own Blended Learning Advisors and Curriculum Consultants. They needed to find ways to work with their individual schools as well and, in common with the AEL roles, find ways to become part of each school's culture. It is therefore feasible for other universities (or parts of universities) to appoint similar roles to work within existing academic elements. The critical factor for AEL and Griffith has been the way in which the roles have engaged with their schools – it is a collegial, collaborative approach dealing with the many and varied issues inherent to a learning and teaching portfolio rather than trying to fix a particular problem or implement just one initiative.

## Conclusions

The examples we have outlined illustrate how the simple, and usually disparate, activities that are conducted at universities can be brought together as an overarching initiative linking technology implementation, educational development and learning and teaching activities in new ways. Partnerships have been critical to the Group as it enables agile responses to the constant challenges of, and changes to, learning and teaching in the contemporary Australian higher education sector. Through these partnerships new processes and IT platforms have been adopted; existing IT systems have been adapted and leveraged to address new needs and to complete tasks more effectively and efficiently; courses have been developed for the multi-modal face-to-face, blended and online models of delivery; and data is extracted from increasingly sophisticated IT systems to inform decision-making and direction taking.

An important, but sometimes overlooked, benefit of these dynamic two-way partnerships has been their ability to inform Group-, cross Group- and University-level discussions on learning and teaching IT

issues and policy implementation. Those involved work within the “third space” which allows academics and general/professional staff to connect their areas of expertise and experience as they undertake the many-layered learning and teaching tasks of the contemporary higher education sector.

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