



Increasing flexibility for staff development: Modelling good practice at the University of Western Sydney

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Crafting a quality online learning and teaching environment requires specialist skills and knowledge that can be achieved through well designed and engaging staff development activities. However, as many academic staff have busy workloads balancing the design of e-learning environments, teaching students, undertaking administrative tasks and pursuing research endeavours, engaging these staff in e-learning staff development activities is a challenge. Complexity is added to this scenario when academic staff are geographically dispersed across campuses and staff development programs are centrally provided. This paper describes the staff development approaches of a multi-campus university to engage academic staff in the development of their e-learning knowledge and skills.

Keywords: staff development, self-directed learning, blended learning, face-to-face, fully online.

Introduction

Similar to other universities, the University of Western Sydney (UWS) adopts a primarily on-campus teaching presence blended with online learning activities and resources. More than 93% of units taught at UWS have a presence in the University's centrally managed enterprise wide e-learning system (Blackboard) and these units are designed and developed by more than 1,800 academic staff. This high use of the e-learning system requires a strategic need to enhance the quality of e-learning sites (Correia et al 2008) and this can be achieved through strategic staff development (Robinson 1998) which the University provides through centralised staff development activities as one of its embedded organisational processes. Improving the knowledge and skills of academic staff in designing and managing e-learning environments through embedded organisational processes such as strategic staff development, can improve the quality of e-learning environments (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Sheely et al, 2001, Correia et al, 2008).

UWS Student Satisfaction survey results show that students want flexibility in how they learn and when they learn. UWS staff are no different. As a multi-campus university with six campuses geographically dispersed across the Greater Western Sydney region, staff and students have to travel between campuses for lectures and tutorials. Reducing the amount of time travelling between campuses or in scheduled training sessions was of vital importance to UWS academics who, as stated in Jensen and Morgan (2009, p.3), have a "burgeoning work volume associated with the university's unique structure and profile". This was consistent with feedback from academic staff that their heavy workload left them time poor allowing little time for training, especially to attend face to face sessions at central campus. To address this, a more blended and flexible approach has been taken in the provision of staff development at the university.

This paper discusses a staff development model that provides increased opportunities for flexible access and participation and models good practice for effectively integrating e-learning technologies.

A flexible staff development model

As the University is moving towards increased flexibility for students, the central unit providing staff development has moved towards increased flexibility for staff development with a view that this should model good blended learning practices to enable staff to experience the e-learning environment as their students do (Yang and Cornelious, 2005, Fitzgibbon & Jones, 2004). Participant feedback has reaffirmed

the benefits of flexibility in staff development “*being able to fit this workshop in around my teaching duties instead of the other way round meant that I was actually able to complete all of the workshop*”.

Table 1 outlines the staff development framework used at UWS which consists of three levels. Workshop delivery methods in each ‘level’ are a mixture of one or more of the following methods; Fully Online (FO), Blended (BL) and Face-to-Face (F2F). The framework is also supported by a series of ‘show and tell’ clinics and Face-to-Face Service Desk sessions.

Table 1: Staff development sessions available for academic staff

Acquiring	Essentials in the LMS (FO), Introduction to blended learning (FO)
	The Acquiring level workshops are fully online (FO) workshops with self-directed activities and a range of supporting resources that participants can access in their own time and at their own pace. These workshops are intended to provide participants with an overview of the learning and teaching environment at the University, provide access to examples of good practice and essential information about using the e-learning system. Having these workshops online provides participants with an authentic online experience and for UWS staff who are distributed across six campuses this approach removes the travel time and costs associated with travelling to a central campus for training.
Developing	Jazzing up your e-learning site (F2F), Managing student data (F2F), Using groups, assignments and assessments in the LMS (BL), Designing for communication (BL)
	The Developing level workshops are a mixture of blended (BL) and face-to-face (F2F) workshops that focus on groupings of functionalities within the LMS, such as the communication tools for the Designing for Communication workshop. Using authentic activities, participants are guided through activities designed from the perspective of a student, an instructor and as a site designer so that they can see the full cycle of an activity from creation, to use and through to evaluation. Pedagogy is embedded throughout these workshops to ensure that participants not only know how to use the tools but also how best to use them to improve student learning. The introduction of workshops using a blended delivery method has been highly successful with an increase in the number of participants and survey comments such as “The online component is a great way to get right into the nuts and bolts and get our hands dirty”.
Extending	Assessment of online discussion (F2F), Emerging e-learning Technologies, (F2F); Podcasting (F2F), Using Captivate (F2F), e-Moderating (BL), Sourcing digital content (FO)
	The Extending level workshops are a mixture of fully online, blended and face-to-face workshops designed to extend the capabilities of the e-learning system by the use of external programs and resources, such as podcasting tools and resources and Adobe Captivate. The workshops in this level also extend what a participant has already learnt from previous workshops. An example of this is how both ‘E-moderating’ and ‘Assessment of online discussion’ build on what has already been covered in the Developing level workshop ‘Designing for communication’. These workshops further extend participants’ knowledge and skills through the examination of advanced pedagogical uses of online discussions.

Flexible delivery methods

Fully online delivery

The fully online workshops utilise self-directed activities to allow UWS academic staff to start at a time that suits them and work at their own pace. All these workshops have been designed to model good practice; they showcase what is possible and provide authentic e-learning experiences and examples that participants can re-work to use in their own sites. This particularly suits sessional staff who are often asked to perform learning and teaching tasks in e-learning sites at short notice. Through workshop feedback these staff have reported on the value of fully online workshops as they enable them to develop knowledge and skills in setting up and managing their e-learning environment.

For example, the Introduction to Blended Learning fully online module includes interactive viewlets showcasing other UWS staff who have designed good quality e-learning environments and participants engage in activities that help them understand blended learning models and frameworks, and plan blended learning activities. When this module was made available to staff, within one week, 100 participants had self-registered and according to tracking data available within the site, were regularly using it. One participant commented ‘*I really liked the idea of using a well designed e-learning site to teach about e-learning*’.

Blended delivery

Blended delivery workshops model good practice in the integration of information and communication technologies with face-to-face activities. In the blended delivery workshops, participants have access to an e-learning environment where they have self-directed activities and supporting resources relevant to the workshop topic prior to attending a face-to-face session. There is a workshop facilitator who guides discussion activities, responds to requests for assistance and provides feedback to participants on their progress. At the face-to-face session participants can further develop and refine their skills with the technology and small group activities are included to enable staff to discuss issues and share experiences and ideas.

In the online component of the Designing for Communication workshop participants experience communication and collaboration tools and activities as though they are a student and discuss strategies for using these tools in their teaching. The online component of this workshop is self-directed and runs for two weeks of which participants spend approximately 4 hours online to complete it. At the completion of the online component, there is a hands-on practical workshop where the communication tools are then re-visited where the focus is shifted to the instructor or moderator role.

Face to face delivery

Recognising the diverse needs of UWS staff in the development of their e-teaching skills, face-to-face workshops provide opportunities to focus on the more advanced aspects of the topic as well as hands on support for staff. One such example is the Managing Student Data workshop that focuses on the management of student data through the grade book for both grade management and administrative affordances. This workshop was kept as face-to-face because of staff requesting hands-on assistance in setting up grade books and managing student grades.

The face-to-face workshops in the extending level of the framework are based on tools that extend the capabilities of the e-learning system, such as Captivate to create interactive animated content and Audacity to create and edit audio for podcasts. These workshops also have a wide range of complex tasks that staff prefer to have hands on support for. While these workshops are attended by staff who are looking to add more variety in their content delivery; participants can be divided into two distinct groups, those who have a clear idea of what they want to do but need to learn the skills to be able to do it and those who want to explore the pedagogical possibilities of these technologies. To expect either of these groups, especially the second 'exploratory' group to install software and or access peripheral equipment for an online session would not be feasible.

As new technologies become available, they also need to be supported by staff development. Invariably, these technologies fit directly into one of the existing workshops but before they do staff need to be made aware of their availability and capabilities. To introduce new technologies face to face clinics are conducted. Clinics can be developed more quickly than a workshop and they serve as a testing ground for new workshop ideas, especially if there is high participant interest in a clinic. These clinics are very popular as staff can come along to hear about a new technology, see examples of how it is used to enhance learning and understand some of the issues associated with using this technology in their teaching. Where possible the clinics are run prior to the beginning of semester where they are run back-to-back with a face-to-face service desk session. The face-to-face service desk sessions are where staff attend a session to work on their e-learning sites for the upcoming semester in a supported environment.

Self-help resources

To augment our workshops and clinics, we also have the E-Learning Service Desk and an E-Learning Staff Support site which contains self-help resources such as reference sheets and interactive viewlets. Having resources in a central site in the e-learning system not only makes them easily accessible to all staff but also allows the central unit to better monitor the use of resources by using the site's tracking data. The tracking data is a valuable tool when carrying out future resource planning.

Evaluation

As the workshops use the LMS, leveraging the tracking reports within the workshop sites can provide valuable insights to how they are being used and how often. For example the *Introduction to Blended Learning* (FO) workshop showed the average time spent per session by participants is 11 minutes with a frequent return rate. The tracking data showed that several participants are regularly accessing the site six

months after the date of their first access. The frequent return rate over an extended period suggests that the workshop is seen as a valuable resource. The relatively short time spent on average per visit suggests participants access the site around their other commitments and to meet particular needs of interest.

Participant feedback through online channels and workshop surveys are also useful indicators in the evaluation process of staff development activities. For example, from a workshop survey '*I particularly valued the online format so I could take breaks and do this at my own pace*' or from one of the discussion boards '*The examples were great. I think staff will benefit from being able to see it all applied in an actual course*'. On our workshop survey there is a question about preferred delivery method for workshops and participants frequently rate blended delivery first followed by fully online. The return rate of the online survey used for the online and blended delivery workshops was consistently lower than the return rate of the paper based surveys used in the face to face workshops. The consistent positive feedback suggests that our move from all face to face workshops to a mixture of face to face, blended and fully online delivery methods for our staff development activities has been both necessary and successful.

Conclusion

Implementing a staff development model that included fully online, blended and face-to-face workshops provides UWS with affordances such as modelling best practice, reducing the amount of times that staff needed to travel to training, reducing the length of face-to-face sessions and allowing staff greater access to workshops. The online, self-directed learning workshops have been especially beneficial as staff are able to start at a time suitable to them and they can work through them at their own pace.

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