



Developing best practices in online teaching and learning to impact students and their organisations

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Online learning and teaching is rapidly increasing worldwide, including New Zealand's schools, tertiary organisations and training companies. Extensive professional and organisational development is urgently needed to enable high quality education and training. We have evidence that our courses in best practices in online teaching and learning are impacting schools and tertiary education, including nurse education. This paper highlights aspects of our courses that appear to result in improvements in online and blended learning.

Keywords: professional development, organisational development, online teaching and learning, instructional design

Introduction

Blended and online learning and teaching benefits student learning and achievement and is rapidly growing practice in all sectors of education and training worldwide (Means et al, 2009; Davis & Rose, 2007). Our passion is teacher education and professional development with a particular focus on engaging teachers, tutors and support staff in 21st century learning. We recognise that online learning is spreading responsibilities across people and locations so that many more staff need to be prepared and to creatively engage with online learning in ways that support their discipline(s) and beliefs. Thus everyone in education and training will need to get to grips with blended learning – and understand the role that they play. Our current research for the New Zealand Ministry of Education confirms that this also applies to e-learning for tutors of adults with literacy and numeracy needs (Davis & Fletcher, 2009), as well as schools and tertiary education.

This presentation focuses on the courses that we offer in best practices in online teaching and learning for faculty professional development to enhance the quality of blended and distance learning for all ages of learners and their schools, polytechnics, universities and training organisations. Our programmes are outlined on <http://www.litarts.canterbury.ac.nz/e-learning/>

Our online courses

We now provide an overview of the approach and impact of our online professional development for those in education and training, including school and tertiary teachers and health educators and their education and training organisations in New Zealand and abroad. We have evidence of impacts on the student and their organisation that promote the development of sustained high quality online learning. For example, the research of Morrow and Bagnall (2009, in press) provide evidence of the importance of the value of local communities and student choice. That research on our programme was confirmed by Mackey (2009). In essence, the blending of teachers' workspaces and other communities with their online learning experiences increases the impact of professional development. These often overlooked blends provide reciprocal benefits for the learner and for their organisations.

Our course at graduate and postgraduate level entitled "Best practices in online teaching and learning" has resulted in the development of higher quality teaching and learning in the education sector. With the explosion of online learning in USA schools has increased research in this field (e.g. Davis et al, 2007, 2009) and recently the impact has extended to online nurse education.

Our online classrooms, as cognitive instructional design methods suggest, are carefully designed so that the students will easily be able to relate it to their existing schema. Our online courses are structured into sections which relate to the elements of online learning. Keeping information in clearly identified, brief, easily accessible chunks and presenting some information as steps to take in their planning and learning improves assimilation, application and reflective practice.

An authentic problem solving context in which constructivist learning can take place exists within each course. Students are facilitated to create their own online learning space for a section or course that they will pilot – this is the problem to be solved. To accurately portray the task, the learning has been presented using our LMS, Moodle, and the same tools which we have made available to them. Some students negotiate instead to create their first course in their own LMS and this is encouraged where adequate support is available. At times some students work on a course that they have taught and are supported to improve it and undertake their first action research in this field.

The online courses at graduate and postgraduate level are designed as an example within which we give support, make suggestions, encourage, and provide resources. Other examples with accompanying reasoning give students the opportunity to grasp the process behind the learning and increase their experience of online learning and possible solutions to some of the problems they might encounter. Our course environment provides rich in just-in-time information relevant to the students' tasks and supported with discussions of relevant literature. The creation of a community of learners providing the opportunity to work with others in solving problems is created through the conversation and collaboration tools including forums and Web 2.0 tools.

We also recognise that our students are practitioners that often become leaders of online and blended learning for their organisations and that they will face many challenges. Challenges to innovations with online learning according to Covington et al., (2005) are: instructor resistance; lack of institutional planning, support and recognition; and the need for professional development in the areas of both technology and pedagogical understanding. Administrative and faculty concerns focus around the length of time needed to learn to use the new technology effectively, to develop and implement courses, and the adverse effect on other work. Similar concerns are experienced in schools and training organisations. Our online course entitled "Change with digital technologies in education" prepares our students for this leadership. During 2009 most students on our courses indicated through formative feedback and course evaluations that their courses had impacted their practice and many also indicated organisational impact too. Illustrations of these are provided within our poster.

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