



Aiming for the right place: eLearning strategy past, present and future

Cathy Gunn, The University of Auckland: New Zealand

Josephine Csete, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

John Barnett, University of Western Ontario, Canada

Is there an 'ideal' approach to strategic planning for a rapidly changing area such as technology in education? Are there principles or heuristics that define useful process and help to avoid pitfalls? Do lessons from the past inform actions in the future? Where does my institution aim to be with elearning five years from now, and is it making the right moves to get there? This symposium will review elearning goals and implementation strategies from different parts of the world. Panel members from Hong Kong, North America and New Zealand will present regional perspectives drawn from experience across different organisations. Participants are invited to share their experience and opinions of elearning strategies through small group discussions. The focus is on how strategies are developed and implemented, what outcomes are expected or have been achieved, and what principles of good practice can be derived.

Background

Most tertiary institutions adopt some form of strategy designed to drive an elearning agenda across the faculties. Governments pursue similar initiatives at national level. Statements of strategic intent typically focus on widening access, accommodating the needs of a growing and diversifying student population, and last but not least, articulating social constructivist learning theories in course design. In brief, the aims are to respond to changing patterns of demand for tertiary education, and to incorporate new pedagogies into the curriculum. The presenters' experience identifies this as an important area of educational development that is managed with varying degrees of success. A recent report sponsored by the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) notes that, "generally there are significant shortcomings in the capability of senior management teams in [higher education] to identify and exploit the full strategic potential of technology", Duke et al (2008). Another report states that, "policies can drive forward an agenda for change, but the real test comes at the point of use" (JISC 2008, p5). Both publications imply that front line practitioners might usefully play a greater role than they currently do in shaping strategic direction. Regardless of the approach in any particular situation, hindsight reveals as many cases where strategic initiatives have proved to be misguided as where they have been successful.

A topical area for discussion

This is a topical area for people involved in elearning at tertiary, or any other level of a national education system. The symposium format draws on the collective experience of an audience with different interests, and panel members representing different regions of the world, to address questions that continue to challenge us all. Why have a strategic plan? What kind of elearning strategies are institutions pursuing in the current context? Are there certain characteristics that make some strategies more likely to succeed, and if so, what are they? What lessons can be learned from past experience to guide future actions? The main purpose of the event was to share experience amongst participants, using a practical focus to pull together principles or heuristics that can be applied in different institutional settings.

The symposium format

The symposium was designed to appeal to a wide audience by combining an overview of high-level concepts with real world, illustrative examples. The format was intended to engage both novices and experienced practitioners: including those responsible for driving and evaluating strategy; working with elearning at practice level; and in academic or IT support roles. Experience shows that limited channels

for communication between people in these different roles can be a barrier to design and implementation of relevant elearning strategies. The session created an opportunity for participants to engage with different regional and role-based perspectives, and to reflect on past experience as a way to inform the future.

Each panel member opened with a short summary of his or her perspective on elearning strategy, drawn from tertiary sector experience in a major region of the world. Participants were invited to identify key challenges and success factors from their own institutional or regional experience. Common themes provided the focus for small group discussions of different approaches currently being pursued, and the outcomes that are expected or have been achieved. Discussions explored the rationale (if known), implementation approach, key factors that contributed to outcomes, other ways objectives might have been approached, and what was learned with hindsight. Panel members summarised the discussions in a plenary session, with principles and guidelines for elearning strategies going forward.

Questions for discussion

1. *Does your institution have an eLearning strategy?*

Raise your hand if:

- Your organisation has a written elearning strategy or policy.
- Your strategy / policy is aligned with common practice.
- Your strategy / policy is supported by resource allocation.

Responses (whole group) - Less than 40% raised their hands for any question – and different people raised their hands for different questions.

2. *Common practice is the embodiment of planning or policy, whether explicit or implicit. What are the common eLearning practices at your institution? Does this practice correspond or align with an eLearning or teaching and learning strategy? Are resources allocated according to strategy/policy?*

Responses: 3 x small groups facilitated by panelists

Group A

- All courses have an LMS component, even though every [course] site is created, it has to be approved / activated by a coordinator.
- Some have minimum standards for each course, though this is a very new initiative.
- Some have a course template (shell) or outline, though its nothing substantial. These are important because they create consistency for students.
- Some (but not all) automatically copy course content from year to year.
- Students often demand that instructors use the technology.
- In some cases, academics are in charge of the content but not in all.
- Practicality rather than policy has created what there is.
- Some have help for the visually challenged.
- Most provide professional development for staff.

Group B

- Practices differ depending on whether online presence is encouraged or required, in the former case, a required web presence in Moodle (with “presence” defined) and courses created online automatically. In the latter, no requirements or policy regarding online presence. Another approach is “Trying to go beyond the minimum” by encouraging teachers to use eLearning in more creative, interactive ways
- Many organisations have no relevant policy. Some have a strategy – but this is not ratified by the Vice Chancellor.
- In one organisation - Written standards have been established for quality of online resources. In another – the concept of “equitable student learning journey” is used, and both on and off campus students must have access to the same resources for learning.
- Resourcing and support models differ, for example a Centre may offer learning design advice but no technical development support. Another has a Distance Education Centre for support in the University.

- How clear are our institutions on these practices? It seems we are trying to do everything. Ten years ago, distance was more distinct. Now as more teachers are using eLearning in more ways the distinctions are blurring and money and effort is being spent in many different ways rather than focusing on one or two priorities for the institution.
- The group concluded by agreeing that eLearning should be part of the overarching teaching & learning strategy, and relevant policy can be demand driven.

Group C

- Most strategies around elearning are implicit initially, becoming explicit 'after the fact'. Japan is an exception where government policy requires the use of elearning in tertiary institutions.
 - Some strategies / policies are top down and linked to / driven by teaching and learning policies, though many are not. Where there are distance students, much development is demand driven.
 - Common technologies that strategies focus on include lecture recording, Turnitin, blogs/wikis, Second Life, e-exams, online conference software, eportfolios, LAMS (Learning Activity Management System) and the LMS (Learning Management System, also known as a Virtual Learning Environment – VLE).
 - One participant had only just discovered the enterprise LMS, though their use is generally ubiquitous. However, when asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 for creative / educational use of the LMS, all scores fell within the 0-4 range with only one score of five. Mostly they are used for course management, document storage and minimal communication.
 - Some institution-wide initiatives were noted, e.g. integration of LAMS or eportfolios with the enterprise LMS.
3. *Given the existence of explicit or implicit eLearning strategies / policies, what barriers need to be removed, what steps need to be (or are being) taken to move things along in the right direction?*

Group A

- We need to slow down development to give faculty / users a chance to catch up.
- Changing an LMS cannot be done too fast.
- It would be better if the [online] environment was responsive but simpler for users.
- We need staff development for skills and tools rather than content; partnerships with users to make change work; a clear link between technology and learning outcomes. But is it possible? It is important to make it better for students.
- It should be about teaching academics how to teach not just using new tools.
- Academics should have the best tools available.
- We need a vision to move things forward and focus on what we are trying to achieve.
- We need to make clear that technology does increase student 'time on task' [and] shows real gains for student learning.
- elearning is overarching. Kids in schools already use the tools even though they may not understand them. The university should be more advanced so students will value their education.

Group B

- Leaders are not fully aware of the possibilities of technology.
- eLearning burdens faculty workload –time allowance is required but not always granted.
- Funding faculty initiatives rather than lone rangers encourages more sustainable development.
- Leadership tends to think of technology as a “bandwagon” activity. Negative examples from various organisations:
 - Ticking the box to indicate type of eLearning used (to fulfill compliance)
 - E before the learning (technology over pedagogy)
 - Inappropriate eLearning KPIs
- Inviting key people to see things/raise awareness is helpful, e.g. through activities such as showcases & “bribery” afternoon teas.
- Pay attention to the people who have purchasing power – they may be attracted by the “sexy” technology.
- Several organisations have tried to create Communities of Practices with varying results – these are usually led by central support staff, e.g. 1 hr weekly interest group on mobile learning with hands on activities and mind mapping how to use in courses; tutoring community operating like a journal club (less successful); discipline based community operated for one semester.
- Several places have used “champions”

Group C

- Basic standards for web-based courses are useful for showing exemplars and setting criteria for design. Blackboard has exemplars on the web and offers useful models for development.
- An elements framework for e.g. collaboration and minimum presence is useful where one is implemented. This sets standards for both teachers and students.
- One university monitors all courses for structure and elements – the review panel can stop courses going live until they are up to minimum standard. Although this is labour intensive, it does help to maintain quality.
- One participant described a structured support system – all courses have an online presence based on a standard template. Peer review process is used to provide feedback.
- One challenge noted and agreed on by many in the group was poor alignment between IT support and learning / educational design support services. Time constraints did not allow discussion to proceed in this direction, though it could have been productive as many in the group were engaged on the topic.
- Authority at senior level can also be problematic. “A Trojan horse to quality.”
- Cultural factors around seniority, authority, power to influence and autonomy were also noted as barriers to progress.

The take home messages

Finally, the presenters asked participants to consider how these principles and practices play out in their own institutional context, and before leaving the session, to write down a key message or point gleaned from the session. They agreed to summarise and circulate these comments as a follow up to the discussion. The following issues were noted.

Drivers - Government policy does not always translate to good [institutional] eLearning strategy and therefore is not always welcome. An eLearning policy needs to be an integral part of teaching & learning policy, taken seriously and appropriately resourced. [Our] institution needs a ‘technology’ strategy rather than an ‘eLearning strategy’ as this is already covered in the teaching & learning strategy.

Similar issues - It is remarkable how similar our issues, challenges, and successes are across institutions, e.g. leaders require or expect uptake of eLearning but don’t know what this means in practice, and may not provide policy and support. We may not all be in the same boat but [we are] charting the same waters, using similar strategies, though unfortunately with limited success. However, our institution is doing way better than internal staff think we are in comparison to others.

Policy and practice - Practice drives policy! Perhaps common practice really does need to come before, and inform policy. If policy comes after practice, then observe + synthesise. Policy after technology is used with students so demand comes from the ‘coal face’ not from the universities’ leaders. Basic standards could support good practice. Policy makers need to be more aware of what is happening at teaching level and design policy around that rather than deciding policy in isolation. [It’s often] fringe technologies that are driven by practice. [There are] challenges moving these to centrally supported systems. Teaching and learning units should have ‘authority’ to define and implement policy (after practice).

The next generation of learners - Primary learners are all eLearning savvy. Therefore, when they get to tertiary [they will be ready for eLearning. So Universities should be in transition to increased eLearning. Try to imagine what next generation expects from a university that they want to go to and start preparing.

Integration - Its important for decision makers to acknowledge the significance of eLearning and the time involved for staff. The eLearning policy should look at the workload model for academic staff so that they are not expected to do it on top of their normal work. Institutions are not clear what they want, e.g. distance or blended.

Teaching quality - Seems to still be a belief that eLearning will solve, enhance and improve teaching quality. [We do] need to focus on teaching quality, student engagement and enhance learning experience, and if technology supports this, it is great, but if not, don’t use it! eLearning should not be a goal in and of itself. Tools and technology [are] fast moving [and we] need to focus on desired outcomes for well-defined student population. Strategic clarity at that level is key before defining for eLearning. The goal should be to improve learning outcomes and eLearning should be used as a tool. Retain the humanity of

humans. We are designed to talk to each other while encouraging use of technologies to support communication. Retain, support and enhance the f2f ones.

Resolving tensions - [There is a] collision zone between top/down policy and 'bottom' up practice by academics where the academy is split into innovators/adaptors and autonomous academics reluctant to change. Academic buy-in is central to meaningful progress. Unless an academic sees time/teaching & learning/status advantage in eLearning, then uptake will remain a compliance issue. eLearning challenges academic autonomy (of old) as it is on the spectrum of QA with checking and control of online courses at different institutions and the need for standards.

Professional development for all - The managers of resources or others need to be educated about what is eLearning / blended learning so they know what they are talking about. Strategic decision makers from different areas of the university, e.g. Finance, IT – often have different views on the same eLearning technologies - need to engage them on their own terms. A number of institutions have tried and found problems keeping communities of practice going.

Definitions - Need to be careful about defining 'quality' in eLearning. The fact that the LMS may be used principally for providing access to resources / support material does not mean bad practice – it needs to be considered as part of the whole teaching & learning process.

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