

Quality in the e-landscape: A collegial and developmental approach

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Since the appearance of e-learning in the tertiary education sector a range of approaches have been used to enhance the quality of online learning environments. Building on these approaches, at the University of Western Sydney our approach is one of developing quality e-learning sites in a collegial and developmental manner, as a central part of overall good teaching practice. Our view is that, in order for the process to be truly collegial and developmental, it needs to be supported across all levels of the academic environment and, importantly, it should be adopted by academics rather than being imposed upon them. A central aspect of the collegial and developmental approach is that academics should be provided with the skills and support to be the drivers of quality in the e-landscape. This paper introduces a project that applies this developmental and collegial philosophy to building quality in our online learning environments in a whole of enterprise context.

Keywords: quality, standards, online learning environments, e-learning

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has an enterprise wide e-learning system that is used by 35,000 students accessing more than 2,300 sites over the course of the academic year. More than 1,300 staff members engage with e-learning as part of their day-to-day activities and with the increasing use of e-learning there is a strategic need to enhance the quality of online learning environments. Different institutions have developed standards for covering both technical and pedagogical principles that can be used to evaluate technology based learning environments and resources (e.g. Milne & Dimock, 2005). However, the development of tools for evaluation is insufficient in itself: if these tools are not adopted by staff, or if staff do not have the requisite skills to improve online learning environments, then quality cannot be achieved. A number of authors emphasise that the process of developing quality e-learning environments should be planned in a strategic way (Milne & Dimock), embedded in and supported by organisational processes (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Sheely, Veness, & Rankine, 2001) and policy documentation (McNaught, 2001).

Marshall (2004) describes the need for “a whole of enterprise approach” (p. 16) in the development and sustainable implementation of technology in learning environments, emphasising the importance of policy and describing the process as one of cultural change. The importance of considering key issues across the range of key stakeholders, from executive levels through to support staff, is critical if there is to be institution wide support for developing quality (Holt, Rice, Smitten & Bowly, 2001). This includes leadership in promoting and sustaining change (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

While leadership may be a key component for change, we are of the opinion that a truly whole of enterprise approach supports and develops academics as the drivers of quality improvement in online learning environments. A set of standards used to evaluate and develop quality in online learning environments needs to accommodate staff with varying levels of proficiency, both in technical and pedagogical contexts. Consideration of the proficiency of the designer, lecturer, or unit coordinator has likewise been raised by Siragusa, Dixon, and Dixon (2007). Further, a developmental approach also recognises that while the use of e-learning is increasing, adoption of e-learning methods by academics occurs at different rates (Holt et al., 2001). Academics therefore need to be provided with the opportunity to develop their skills, both in using the technology and in knowledge of learning design. Holt and Seagrave (2003) describe the changing role of the educator, whereby the emphasis should be on “preserving teacher agency in e-learning” (p. 229) and encouraging the development of teacher knowledge in the use of e-learning. Some authors have also described the involvement of peer review processes as an important means by which academic staff can be supported, in a collegial way, to improve the quality of online resources (e.g. at <http://www.merlot.org>) and online learning environments (e.g. McNaught, 2001; Wood & George, 2003). The integration of both a collegial and developmental approach is therefore critical if the university as a whole is to move towards providing quality online learning environments.

Having described the theoretical basis for preferring a collegial and developmental approach to implementing a whole of enterprise improvement strategy, this paper will now describe how this approach has been used at UWS in a project, which is in its initial stages, to develop and implement standards for improving quality in online learning environments. The project adopted a distributed, bottom-up approach to developing quality sites based on two fundamental principles. Firstly, a developmental approach emphasised scaffolding the development of skills and knowledge of staff in designing sites. Secondly, a collegial approach, rather than a top down 'auditing' or pejorative approach was used to review sites according to the standards. Our view is that, in order for the process to be truly developmental and collegial, this approach has to be adopted by academics rather than being imposed upon them. This implies a major cultural shift in understanding and practice.

Developing quality e-learning sites: Project description

While some universities adopt a regulatory or checklist approach to ensuring or encouraging adherence to a set of quality standards, at UWS our approach is one of developing quality online learning environments in the primary learning management system (LMS) as a central part of overall good teaching practice. UWS has a strong e-learning history since introducing e-learning in 1999 (Sheely et al., 2001) and reviews of sites have revealed the richness and complexity of site usage (Rankine & Malfroy, 2006). The university, despite managing the e-learning system centrally, has never adopted a prescriptive/top down template approach to the development of sites. Rather, staff members have been encouraged to use staff development opportunities to learn how to develop quality sites and how to incorporate the technology into their teaching practice. The upgrade to the current LMS and the advanced features made it timely to develop university-wide processes for ensuring better quality online learning and teaching environments.

In line with a whole of enterprise approach (Marshall, 2004), the project team worked with different stakeholders in different ways. The central unit, the Teaching Development Unit, seconded three part-time lecturers into the unit as Lecturers in Higher Education (e-learning), to help co-ordinate the project. This also provided the key links to the three Colleges of the university, and from the outset made salient the importance of a collegial approach. As suggested by Holt et al. (2001), key stakeholders were included in multiple ways. The project was supported by an advisory group consisting of members from senior positions of the university, which maximised the capacity for the processes to be implemented more broadly across the university. Further, in the pilot phase of the development of the standards, consultation within relevant management structures (e.g. Heads of Schools, Associate Heads of Schools – Learning and Teaching) was included to develop methods of engaging academic staff in the process. As an extension, we also included students as key stakeholders, encouraging academics to seek structured feedback from students in line with the standards, to promote a fully whole of enterprise approach.

The developmental approach adopted at UWS was based on developing the skills of the academic and recognising the role of the teacher as the agent of learning (Holt & Seagrave, 2003). As such, we have attempted to apply sound pedagogical principles in the project by considering the "teacher as learner". Other frameworks and quality criteria are often presented as checklists and include standards that are relevant to higher level pedagogical design issues (e.g. Wood & George, 2003) or may be too detailed or demand a high level of proficiency in technology skills (e.g. Milne & Dimock, 2005). Using a developmental approach, we recognised that staff may need to evaluate sites with reference to basic design criteria, and be provided with an opportunity to develop their skills before progressing to more advanced site development and evaluation. As such, the approach used in designing the current standards most closely reflects those described by Jackson and D'Alessandro (2003) at the University of Tasmania in which standards are divided into a set of *basic standards*, and a set of advanced *exemplary standards*.

Thus, because adoption of e-learning occurs at different rates (Holt et al., 2001), the developmental framework was based on the following principles:

- a) A basic set of standards must be simple enough to be used by staff who have a basic level of familiarity and technical proficiency with the LMS;
- b) A basic set of standards must be able to be understood by staff who have limited familiarity with pedagogical approaches and relevant terminology;
- c) With appropriate support and resources, staff can move towards developing sites that use advanced technological functions.

The Basic Standards were developed with reference to the scholarly literature, adapted to the UWS context, and are provided as a self-review framework that allows staff to independently rate the quality of

their site against good design principles. The self-review framework consists of the following four basic standards, each of which has associated criteria:

1. *Organisation and Appearance* focuses on principles that support clear structure and presentation of the site (e.g. “*Site design promotes ease of navigation*”);
2. *Consistency and Compliance* emphasises institutional and legal aspects such as copyright, privacy and consistency in documentation (e.g. “*Information in the site is consistent with the Unit Outline*”);
3. *Appropriate Use of Tools* promotes using tools with clear purpose and responsible management (e.g. “*Expectations about use of communication tools are clear to students*”);
4. *Learner Resources and Supports* focuses on ensuring students are appropriately directed to available supports and resources (e.g. “*Links to learning supports are contained in the site*”).

Staff can use the review by responding to the criteria using a scale which typically includes responses such as “Yes”, “No”, and “Working towards”, and then use the information to develop their e-learning sites hosted on the LMS. Importantly, a developmental approach is embedded into the framework in two ways. Firstly, as in the documentation provided by the University of Tasmania (2008), we have included a rationale to assist designers in developing an understanding of good practice as well as development strategies and resources relevant to each criterion that assist designers to improve their sites. Our approach has been to provide thorough details of strategies that allow staff to modify sites in accordance with each criterion, but we also provide information about professional development opportunities (such as workshops) that may be relevant. Secondly, we have extended the emphasis on the developmental approach by creating a support site within the LMS itself, available to all designers, where staff can access the standards and additional support about how to use the standards, with examples of good and poor practice in relation to each criterion. This site is itself a model of a site that demonstrates the design principles used in the standards.

In using a collegial approach, we chose to work together with staff rather than to solely adopt a top down, imposed, and possibly threatening, approach. The pilot project exemplified the collegial approach by working with staff who offered to review the standards and provide feedback. While the Head of School encouraged participation, it was voluntary and the results of the self-review were not required to be shown to management. Instead, staff in the pilot project could make changes to their sites according to the development strategies, but were also offered support from the central e-learning unit and the Lecturers in Higher Education seconded to the unit to discuss the review and the quality improvements that could be made. This again demonstrates the use of a collegial approach in developing quality in the e-landscape.

In a more structured way, we are also encouraging the growth of a culture of collegial peer review. Whilst this is not emphasised in the implementation of the standards used by the University of Tasmania, it is reflected in accounts by other authors (e.g. McNaught, 2001; Wood & George, 2003) and is subsequently incorporated in available standards (see University of South Australia, 2003). In fact, the University of Sydney (2005) goes so far as to embed suggested guidelines for the peer review process within the relevant policy documentation. In this project, the opportunity for peer review is considered important to the developmental approach so we have developed a peer review framework that mirrors the same criteria used in the self review framework. This not only supports the developmental approach by allowing designers to provide feedback and make suggestions about the site, it also provides an alternative perspective. This maximises the likelihood of identifying differing perspectives and facilitating discussion between peers that may assist designers in more deeply identifying areas for quality improvement. By comparison with other approaches, our model therefore provides more checks and balances through other sources of feedback that are explicitly mapped to the same criteria. This encourages further assurance of quality.

Outcomes of the pilot project and future directions

The Basic Standards were piloted with academics across three different Schools across different Colleges. Feedback from the pilot participants suggested the following:

- The self review process was “*quick*”, “*easy to apply*”, and “*straightforward*”;
- Engaging with the self review process encouraged participants to “*think more carefully*” about how to improve current sites, but also how to plan and design future sites;
- The reflective process prompted some participants to consider how they could go beyond the Basic Standards to use the LMS to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Importantly, adopting a collegial and developmental approach also involved modifying some parts of the Basic Standards (e.g. wording of criteria, response types) according to participant feedback. Given the range of sites assessed and the range of experience of participants, it appears that the Basic Standards can be applied to sites with differing levels of complexity and can be used by designers with differing levels of familiarity with the LMS. The self review takes approximately 20-25 minutes to complete depending on the complexity of the site and familiarity with the LMS.

A whole of enterprise approach has been adopted in implementing the standards in second semester 2008. Direct access to the self review and peer review frameworks has been extended to all unit coordinators via the support site. In addition, the availability of the standards has been promoted through announcements from senior management, and the process has also been supported collegially through presentations and discussions with academic staff conducted by the Lecturers in Higher Education seconded to the Teaching Development Unit. We have applied our collegial and developmental approach to the ongoing evaluation of the framework by encouraging staff members to discuss the standards with peers and to provide feedback to the project team via the dedicated support site.

In addition to the development of the Basic Standards, a set of advanced standards are currently being developed, in line with Jackson and D'Alessandro's (2003) approach. This is important because quality online learning environments necessarily incorporate the pedagogical principles that underlie good learning design (McNaught, 2001; Oliver & Herrington, 2001; Siragusa, Dixon, & Dixon, 2007). In addition, Holt and Seagrave (2003) have suggested that there is a "technological and pedagogical disjunction" (p. 228) emerging in the push towards implementing educational technology systems. They indicate, for example, that expectations of efficiency highlight the difference between simple content delivery, which can be provided efficiently, and a more resource intensive emphasis on the use of educational technology to facilitate learning. Thus, while the Basic Standards focus on technological and design aspects, the advanced standards adopt an explicitly pedagogical approach, for example by emphasising the importance of learning designs that foster *interactivity and engagement* (see e.g. Garrison & Anderson, 2003). This requires higher level knowledge and skills in the application of technological and pedagogical principles. Accordingly, our advanced standards will also provide the scaffolding for those proficient in the Basic Standards to continue to develop as their design of online learning environments is increasingly driven by pedagogical principles. The development and implementation of advanced standards based on a pedagogical framework will, in this context, also require a whole of enterprise improvement strategy, built on a collegial and developmental approach that enables academics to be the drivers of quality in the e-learning landscape.

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