

E-teachers at work: Exploring a process for reviewing e-teaching for ongoing professional learning



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The effective teacher is a reflective teacher who seeks to learn from a range of sources (literature, formal theory, evidence) in order to continually improve student learning. This project seeks to capture the impact on practice inherent in the collegial development of a theoretically informed framework which enables lecturers to monitor and analyse what they do to create an effective online teacher presence and thereby facilitate a productive online learning environment for their students. Initially, the project involves a pilot group of tertiary e-teachers interacting with the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) to develop a framework to monitor and analyse online interactions for evidence of their teacher presence. Secondly, lecturers will be invited to submit an electronic portfolio which contains samples of online interaction which are evidence of their teacher presence online. Thirdly, working with an experienced online lecturer as a mentor, lecturers can develop a process which helps them analyse and review this data to identify both strengths and areas for further professional learning. Finally, through a reflective process lecturers will identify factors which contribute to effective online teacher presence. This is a work-in-progress report on this research project which received the 2006 ASCILITE research grant. This concise paper outlines the research proposal, rationale and methodology, and gives an update on progress with the project.

Introduction

Lecturers (e-teachers) who get involved with e-learning face a number of challenges. Often they are grappling with a way of teaching in which they have no experience as learners, and while feedback processes may be available for monitoring and analysing the face-to-face lecturing environment, few systems are in place in most institutions to give supportive feedback to staff about their teaching effectiveness in the online environment. For both lecturers new to e-learning and more experienced staff, feedback is often anecdotal, or limited to infrequent student evaluation surveys, or based on global course statistics such as retention and completion rates. There are few well-known conceptual frameworks to analyse this feedback and lecturers are often daunted by 'best practice' e-teaching guidelines which often turn out to be long and detailed checklists of what the lecturer should be doing online.

The seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education have been used as guidelines for effective teaching and learning in the face-to-face environment for nearly 20 years. Extrapolating these to the e-learning environment, lecturers can formulate a framework which enables them to analyse their actions in the online environment. Each lecturer can do this by a portfolio approach, either using the selected LMS online course as an e-portfolio or by outputting printed copy. As this data is recorded automatically by the Learning Management System software, no additional work is required by the lecturer to gather this data.

A concern often expressed is the need for lecturers to 'buy in' to any evaluation process in the context of a supportive and encouraging environment which stimulates ongoing professional learning. This concern is heightened when lecturers are working in a different learning system where increased vulnerabilities are present. Any evaluative process of online teaching practice must give teachers the confidence to be able to review and receive feedback for this new and challenging dimension in their teaching role. As the process within this project would be shaped and owned by those involved it is deemed to therefore be more likely to lead to transformative professional learning. Also, as outlined more fully within the methodology section, this project involves an approach to reflective evaluation which takes cognisance of the time demands on both lecturers and other staff involved in this process.

Literature

There have been a limited number of research contributions for this area of inquiry. A case study which is relevant to this project (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy, 2001) applied the seven principles to

evaluating four online courses at a mid-western American university. However this was a highly labour-intensive evaluation involving the analysis of 'hundreds of pages of information and thousands of student and instructor postings' and this approach required large amounts of time from the reviewers as well as the teaching staff to implement. Consequently, it has little generic application to the field of tertiary e-learning. Another example of the application of the seven principles to the online environment is the work of Pavano & Gould (2004), who as current online practitioners listed a limited number of suggested indicators of best practice for each principle in a journal editorial.

Another relevant study formulated and tested a tool for measuring all the elements of teacher presence using content analysis (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Teacher presence is a term used to describe one component of the model composed of three 'presences' outlined by Anderson, Archer and Garrison (2000). This study used content analysis to code lecturer postings and is a useful contribution to this area of research. The focus of this study on analysis of discussion postings only is a limitation in the current LMS environment which provides a much wider range of interactive tools for student-teacher interaction. However this study does provide an alternative model for evaluating what the lecturer does online compared to the seven principles for good practice framework.

Seven principles for good practice

The seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) have been used as guidelines for effective teaching and learning in the face-to-face environment for nearly 20 years. A summary of the key points is listed below.

Good practice in undergraduate education:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasises time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Extrapolating these to the e-learning environment, participating lecturers have formulated a framework of good practice in relation to teacher presence which enables them to analyse their actions in relation to teacher presence in the online environment.

Methodology

This project is being carried out within a participatory action research paradigm because of its established link with professional learning, collaboration and the fact that rather than being imposed from without, it involves those responsible for the practice to be improved. Action research has previously been proposed and practised as a professional development model in adult education (Coles, 1999; McNiff, 2002). Professional development through action research "builds on a model of learning, where practitioners are challenged and helped to find new ways of doing things" (McNiff, 2002). It is participatory research which enables people to work towards the improvement of their own practices through an increased awareness of their capabilities and their influence on the teaching/learning process. In action research approaches, the practitioner(s) talk through ideas with a listening supporter (the researcher) (McNiff, 2002). In keeping with a participatory action research approach, the researcher is very much committed to the learning within the process and while outside the project he/she is not detached.

Stenhouse (1981) traces the historical emergence of case study research in education back to the curriculum evaluation studies of the 1960's. He broadly categorises case study research into three camps, purely descriptive case studies, evaluative case studies involving some degree of judgment and critical analysis and action research in which case study or studies inform the formative process of development and improvement in an institution. The research project fits the last category, with the predominance of qualitative data collection using a wiki, survey questionnaire and interviews with participants. It is a *singular site* case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and does not seek to compare or contrast the framework or process the group develops with other groups either inside or outside the institution.

Participants are six volunteer lecturers from a New Zealand undergraduate tertiary institute working with the researcher who will act as a participant/observer. Permission has been sought from students for research use of course materials contained in the portfolio which is being reviewed.

The research seeks to develop and refine a framework and process for lecturers to understand, analyse and improve teacher presence based on the seven principles for good practice. Both the framework (as it applies to the e-learning environment) and the review process have been developed collectively and collaboratively by participants.

The framework is now being used by participants to review courses taught online by members of the group (either web-enhanced or web-based) using the process to which the group has agreed. The framework and process developed will be evaluated by the practitioners at the end of the project through a questionnaire and interview on key themes of the project – usefulness of the framework and process, whether they found the process supportive and helpful, whether it enabled them to identify strengths in their online practice, as well as areas for ongoing professional learning at the end of the process. Finally, analysed interview and questionnaire data will shape any further questions to be used within the group to modify the framework and process as part of the continuing action research cycle.

Concluding comment

This project is significant for three reasons. First, it builds on an established research-based framework relating to face-to-face teaching – the seven principles for good practice. It seeks to apply this framework to the online environment, which has only been done once before in a limited context. Second, the project also seeks to fill a gap by developing a framework specifically for use in online teaching. Third, the project will pilot the use of this framework within a collegial and supportive environment. Consequently, the three factors together lead to the development of a supportive process for reviewing e-teaching which will be accessible, practical and helpful to e-teachers who wish to analyse their e-teaching skills. This has wide-ranging significance because, for many tertiary institutions engaged in e-learning, a review process of this type has not previously been developed or piloted.

The progress to date includes the completion of the framework by the participant group, comprising 30 primary indicators of teacher presence in the online environment, and 41 secondary indicators. These indicators have been formulated and rated by the group using a consensus process with a mixture of face-to-face meetings and a wiki to record and modify suggested items. The primary indicators which have been developed are relatively coherent in relation to other models, such as the e-learning maturity model (Marshall & Mitchell, 2004) and also have some consistency with examples of existing good practice indicator lists (such as Haynes, 2001). The process for review of online courses has also been completed by the group - titled the Collegial Appraisal Process (CAP) involving triads of staff acting in the roles of course lecturer/self-reviewer, peer reviewer and interviewer. The review process for online courses is seen as a collegial conversation rather than a checklist exercise. Two triads using this pattern are currently engaged in the reviewing process, which will be completed early in 2008.

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