Gathering online representations of practice about assessment for use as a professional development tool: A case in progress

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The Assessment Snapshots digital resource at the University of Western Sydney is a current project to produce locally contextualised resources about effective assessment practice. Assessment case studies showcased through the project offer insights into how individual teachers in the disciplines design assessment strategies which respond to the challenges of teaching and learning in the tertiary sector in the 21st century. Resources produced are designed as online professional development tools for self-access by teachers and for use in assessment workshops and curriculum renewal projects. The paper explores the rationale for using case studies as a form of representation of practice, and describes the processes taken by a team of academic developers to gather cases from individual academics, provides initial reflections on those processes, and proposes plans for using the resource and evaluating its effectiveness as a trigger for improvement in assessment practice.

Keywords: online professional development, representations of practice, case studies, assessment

Introduction

This paper describes a current professional development project called Assessment Snapshots that focuses on the development of digital resources on effective assessment practices for academic staff. We explain the processes of developing this resource, rather than the detail of the resources themselves. Using a templated interview structure, each Snapshot captures short case studies or profiles about assessment practice, using the "voice" of the teacher-developer. Our paper begins by exploring the rationale for using representations of practice (Beetham, 2001): in this context, online case studies, as a professional development tool.

Background

Helping teachers to acquire and practise "new knowledge" is a challenge faced by professional developers everywhere. An article published recently in HERDSA News (Sharpe, Beetham, Ravenscroft, 2005) focused on representations of knowledge that are potentially useful to teachers to help them change their current practices. Included as part of a wide-ranging list of types of representations were stories, narratives, profiles and case studies. For the purposes of this paper, we use these terms synonymously. These authors have also pointed out that often this knowledge has been difficult to access, and that some ways of representing this knowledge may be more effective than others. Earlier, Beetham (2001) had questioned how representations of practice help to effect change in educational practice. In research conducted in 2001, she noted that making case studies of curriculum practice easily accessible was rated highly by teachers as a professional development approach. What was not clear, however, was what Ottewill, Shephard & Fill (2002) also recognised, that we know little about how best to ensure that the potential of these resources is realised by staff accessing and using these resources in different ways.

Much of the rationale for making use of case studies is linked to the diffusion of innovation literature, and, in particular, the attributes of an innovation that Rogers (2003) believed were crucial in influencing an adopter's decision to take up an innovation. Cases can show the advantages of a new practice or approach to teaching and learning. They can emphasise the compatibility of an innovation with current values and approaches to teaching. They can be used to acknowledge the complexity or level of difficulty potentially faced by staff taking up the change to teaching practice. They can also show staff who may be reluctant to change current practice that others have made the change. Finally, providing examples through cases makes it easier for staff to see how an innovation or change in teaching practice really

works (Wilson, 2006). Skilful deployment of cases in professional development activities to stimulate discussion and enable the sharing of information, advice and ideas with other colleagues can contribute over time to "learning communities" (Ottewill, Shephard & Fill, 2002).

The Assessment Snapshots project

In brief, our Snapshots project aimed to:

- diffuse knowledge and understanding of good practice in assessment at our university, highlighting the use of diverse assessment methods used across a range of disciplines, class sizes and year levels;
- promote reflection on and discussion about assessment issues within our university; and
- provide self-access learning resources for staff, which can also be used in professional development workshops related to assessment

The project grew out of our conviction that there is a wealth of excellent assessment practices within the institution which are shared amongst 'local' groups of academic staff, but which are not commonly disseminated beyond the immediate program or across disciplines. As a small team of academic developers, we decided to pilot the project and aimed at gathering a maximum of ten case studies which illustrated good practice in assessment in large classes, and to launch these on the University web site for the start of the 2006 academic year. We used our personal networks within the University to identify staff willing to contribute to this pilot phase of the project.

Developing the cases

In developing the cases, we wanted the teacher-contributors to provide their "stories" of assessment practice. Stories are "events, characters and settings arranged in a temporal sequence" (Carter, 1993). In deciding to use teachers' accounts we were guided by a previous study of teachers (Ballantyne, Bain & Packer, 1997), and the work of one of the authors of this paper (Wilson & Stacey, 2004). We were also mindful that such stories can highlight the "pedagogical reasoning" of teachers (Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987). We provided contributors with a Structured Interview Form (SIF) to guide them through the process of writing about their assessment practice. In developing the SIF, we drew upon a number of case study frameworks used to structure similar cases, such as the impressive DELTA (Designing Electronic Learning and Teaching Approaches) WebCT site produced by Monash University (Brack, Samarawickrema & Benson, 2004). We also found of value the KEEP Toolkit templates from the Carnegie Foundation's Knowledge Media Lab website (2006).

The SIF asked staff to describe each of the following:

- their motivation for developing the assessment activity/resource;
- their approach to resolving the issues faced in the particular assessment environment;
- the assessment activity/resource which they developed;
- their evaluation of the efficacy of the activity or resource;
- their advice for others who are interested in adapting the activity/resource; and
- the learning about their own teaching and assessment practice they gained from this experience

Each of us liaised with two or three authors concerning the writing of the case studies and communicated directly with these authors about changes required. To date, seven Snapshots have been placed on our institution's website for access by academic staff.

Reflections on the project

The first stage of our evaluation has taken the form of a number of reflections on the work completed thus far, and ideas for streamlining processes in the future. We offer these reflections in the spirit of helping others who may be considering similar approaches to professional development in their institutions.

We found it challenging to convey clearly to prospective authors exactly what was intended in terms of both content and tone for each case study. This was at least partly related to the fact that this initial group

of Snapshot authors had no examples on our university website to view as a guide to what we were seeking. Subsequent authors will be relatively advantaged in this regard, by having access to a range of Snapshots written by their peers.

Many authors found it difficult to insert their personal voice into the text of their case study. Although the template asked authors to write in the first person, using a conversational tone, and the question prompts in the template are written in the active voice, most of the contributors initially wrote in a traditional academic writing style. Unfortunately this meant that the author's 'story' did not emerge clearly in the Snapshot. This challenge was resolved through discussions with the author and subsequent re-submission, or one of our team rewriting sections of the Snapshot following discussion with the author.

The storytellers responded to the SIF questions in different ways. This individuality of interpretation by contributors enhances the value of the resource, but provided a challenge for the project team - to allow individual stories to emerge while retaining a uniform overall structure of the case study. Having access to existing Snapshots will be beneficial in this regard, for subsequent contributors.

In this pilot stage of the project exploratory discussions with contributors was done individually, focusing on assisting them to think through the writing task. In extending work on this project, we anticipate engaging potential contributors in a roundtable discussion, held early in the process, supported by a set of documentation which would include illustrations of other cases to serve as examples.

Unsurprisingly, we found the length of time required for authors' writing and rewriting processes was significantly longer than planned. Three Snapshots out of the original ten in the pilot phase are still to be finalised, reflecting extensive other work demands faced by both authors and project team members.

Looking to the future, we have considered how we would expand the resource to include a wider range of disciplines and assessment practices. We have decided to issue a formal University-wide invitation to staff and to establish a more formal process of selection from a first-round submission of contributions.

Maximising the impact of the cases

Initial responses to the release of the pilot Snapshots resource have been positive. Our challenge now is to draw teachers' attention to their availability on our website, and to test their usefulness as a professional development tool for changing staff practices in assessment. Beetham (2001, p. 7) advised that "texts about learning and teaching, including case studies, articles, reviews, action research reports and evidence from video recordings or teaching observations" are powerful sources of information for staff, particularly the more experienced teachers. However, she cautioned that less experienced teachers will need support to contextualise them if they are to be seen as potentially useful. Mindful of this caveat, we are conscious that we need to plan how we best to use these resources in our work with different groups of academic staff. To date, they have been used as part of a focus on assessment in our induction workshop for new academic staff. One has been used as a resource in a workshop on designing online discussion tasks for assessment. They could also be used productively in curriculum renewal work, for example, within program-based teams of teachers that are focused on re-defining their assessment practices.

Evaluating their usefulness

In planning our evaluation of the Snapshots project we have adopted a multi-faceted approach to gathering of data about the usefulness of these cases to academic staff. These sources of data include:

- the extent of usage of the resource generated from a count of 'hits' on the web site;
- feedback emails sent to the team, and contacts by other academic staff made with contributors;
- one-to-one interviews with selected staff who indicate, by means of enquiry or feedback to contributors or the team, that they are independently making use of the resource;
- deliberately designing situations where the Snapshots can be used interactively, for example, as part of an online workshop on assessment; and

- focus group interviews involving staff who have used these resources to ascertain the extent to which usefulness has manifested in actual changes to academic practices, such as re-designed assessment, and improvements in student results. (Ottewill, Shephard & Fill, 2002).

Conclusions

Our project has aimed to produce an online case studies resource for professional development which represents current assessment practices within particular disciplines. We have emphasised our approach to collecting these stories from teachers, as well as our plans for making use of and evaluating this resource as an online professional development tool. As the number of case studies, exemplars and showcases of teachers' work proliferates on the web, it is timely that we are able to further our understanding of how these representations of practice are accessed by teachers and used by them. A future paper will draw on the results of our evaluation of this project and complete our story.

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