Professional development online: Showcasing good practice to support open, distance and flexible learning

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Designing Electronic Learning and Teaching Approaches (DELTA) is an online professional development initiative to support pedagogically-appropriate teaching with technology by showcasing examples of good practice in e-learning. The site aims to increase appreciation of e-learning possibilities for teaching staff through an easy-to-access, just-in-time resource. This paper describes the site and introduces the modular evaluation approach which is being implemented to examine it from different stakeholder perspectives. It then focuses on the first evaluation module which investigates how users perceive and engage with DELTA. The paper provides the initial evaluation findings which will contribute to the ongoing improvement of DELTA as a professional development resource that supports open, distance and flexible learning.

Introduction

As technology supported learning is adopted by contemporary higher education institutions, Epper and Bates (2001) warn that the most daunting challenge is still before us. That challenge is to provide complementary staff development to take advantage of the related technological and pedagogical shifts.

Monash University recently adopted WebCT Vista as its centrally supported learning management system (LMS). Since the initial implementation of WebCT Campus Edition in late 2001, there has been a sharp increase in the number of academic users of WebCT and the number of active WebCT units across the university (Weaver, 2003). As with other universities, the challenge for Monash is to support teaching academics to incorporate quality online teaching into their curricula, integrating technical skills with sound pedagogical practices (Ellis & Phelps, 2000), without promoting transfer of existing poor teaching practices to the online environment (Bates, 2000).

In recognition of this professional development need, an online professional development exemplars site entitled Designing Electronic Learning and Teaching Approaches (DELTA) has been developed. This paper briefly describes the site and the rationale behind this approach to staff development. The paper goes on to describe the modular approach designed to evaluate DELTA from the varying perspectives of different stakeholder groups, and reports on the findings from the first evaluation module which was undertaken to gain feedback from DELTA’s primary users (teaching staff and those who support them, but excluding educational designers who, as developers of the site, participated in a separate evaluation module).

DELTA rationale

Staff development through showcasing good practice is not new. Examples include the internationally recognised North American MERLOT site (www.merlot.org) and, in Australia, the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) Learning Designs site (www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au). Showcasing at institutional level is also becoming a widespread practice, because it offers the advantage of providing models which have immediate relevance for colleagues within the institution. These institutional showcases take a
variety of forms but frequently focus on teaching staff talking about their innovations (e.g., Naidu & Cunnington, 2004), rather than focusing on the examples themselves.

The aim of DELTA was to focus directly on the innovation being showcased (where possible through the use of ‘working examples’), and to place each example in its pedagogical context in order to provide models of technology integration into learning and teaching. Hence, it demonstrates appropriate pedagogy in developing electronic learning and teaching materials (Bennett, Priest & Macpherson, 1999) by making available continuous and pedagogically-oriented best-practice examples. These can rarely be explored in great depth in staff development workshops that focus primarily on the technical skills required to produce electronic materials. Presenting DELTA within WebCT Vista supports the time-poor university teacher, facilitating broader, flexible and ‘on demand’ academic staff development opportunities. It is part of a long-term strategy to develop a suite of online and offline support opportunities, linked to WebCT training.

Principles that guided this approach to academic staff development included the following:

- Mentoring – according to Daniel (1996), mentoring in new skills development strongly contributes to individual staff development.
- Learning from demonstrations – Bates (2000) acknowledges that teachers learn successfully from show-and-tell demonstrations by colleagues who have developed good examples of electronic approaches to learning and teaching.
- Problem-centred learning – Zuber-Skerritt (1993) validates the advantage of adopting a collegial, problem-centred and outcome-based strategy. Exemplary resources that respond to an articulated learning need or an existing problem specific to the individual staff member provide a way of implementing such an approach.
- Learning from peers – Alexander and McKenzie (1998) and Wills and Alexander (2000) recommend that staff development opportunities are provided in good teaching practice and suggest that team members who have developed successful projects share their experiences and products.
- Cross-faculty sharing – staff development can be made more inclusive and participatory by encouraging teaching academics to become involved in developing online learning materials in their own disciplines. Facilitating the cross-faculty sharing of examples assists and enables staff to see beyond their disciplines and make connections with their own experience and knowledge as university teachers.
- Exposure – developing an awareness of the possibilities of online learning and teaching helps conceive ways to use technology appropriately in the teachers’ own contexts (Bennett et al., 1999).

**DELTA background**

The original DELTA site was launched in 2002 to provide a resource for teaching academics in response to the introduction of WebCT Campus Edition as a university-wide learning management system. It aimed to help teaching staff conceptualise ways of using the online environment in their teaching by providing a repository of examples of the kinds of electronic resources which could be used within a WebCT site, including some WebCT tools, but especially focusing on the use of other electronic resources for extending online learning and teaching in the WebCT environment. It aimed to place each example in its pedagogical context in order to highlight the kind of learning which it supported, and to indicate the skill level required to create it. Thus, the purpose of DELTA was to assist those who were exploring ways of teaching online. In particular, it was conceived as a resource for educational designers as they helped teaching academics to visualise options that they might consider to enhance the learning of their students. The structure and organisation of this site, including the vignette which accompanied each example to explain its pedagogical function (classified through use of
a learning taxonomy), and the related technical requirements, have been explained elsewhere (Samarawickrema & Benson, 2004).

Piloting of the original site confirmed its usefulness, but indicated that its purpose was not fully understood, especially by teaching academics who were new to teaching with technology, because some were unable to differentiate between the purpose of DELTA and the role of WebCT training. Suggested improvements covered a range of navigation and usability issues. Early use indicated that perceived problems were probably exacerbated by the fact that the familiar look and feel of WebCT had been abandoned to give DELTA a more sophisticated structure as a repository of exemplars. Some were overwhelmed by the number of examples, which included other media, because they did not realise that production support was available to create these components. An evaluation in 2003 determined the main guidelines for the next phase of development.

The resulting recommendations included:

- identifying the intended audiences and the ways in which the DELTA site was expected to be used;
- redesigning the site, so that it ‘looked like’ a WebCT site;
- integrating use of the site with WebCT training;
- ensuring that redesign included easy identification of the purpose of the site, consideration of the pedagogical context of the examples provided, and improvement of structure and navigation to allow users to move quickly and easily to examples;
- extending site features through the use of supporting commentary, tips, general advice about online teaching and the inclusion of parts of successful WebCT sites; and
- accommodating the transition of DELTA to WebCT Vista (to parallel the university’s replacement of WebCT Campus Edition with WebCT Vista).

These recommendations were accepted and redevelopment of the site commenced in early 2004, with the intention that the target audience for DELTA would include teaching academics:

- undertaking WebCT training;
- working with educational designers; or
- consulting the site independently for their own use.

Describing DELTA

To meet recommendations relating to the appearance of DELTA, and to enhance navigation and usability, simplicity was a major principle in guiding the redevelopment of the site. Key decisions included:

- allowing for no more than two mouse clicks to reach information about an example, with a further mouse click to reach a working example (where possible) or a representation of a working example;
- listing examples according to pedagogical purpose (Communication, Learning activities, Content development, Assessment and evaluation, with sub-listings within these categories) rather than by discipline;
- placing each example in its pedagogical context but doing this at an individual example level, rather than using a taxonomy with which many teaching staff are not familiar;
- accompanying each example with:
  - an example description
  - a statement of the learning and teaching issues the example addresses
  - the learning objectives
  - the teacher’s ‘story’
  - teaching tips
  - development information
  - related readings or publications (where applicable)
  - acknowledgements and contact details; and
including space on the site for:

- illustrations of how electronic learning and teaching approaches have been integrated across a whole unit or major unit component;
- a list of resource links which staff might find useful in designing electronic teaching approaches;
- a guide to using DELTA.

The home page of the redeveloped DELTA site is illustrated in figure 1. Currently more than fifty examples are provided on the site, representing a broad coverage of learning and teaching strategies and discipline areas organised under five categories: Communication; Learning activities; Content development; Assessment and evaluation; and Integrated approaches, plus a link to Resources. Examples encompass on-campus, off-campus and off-shore teaching (both wholly online and blended approaches) and include features such as images, streamed audio and video, and multimedia interactions, some of which are delivered on CD-ROM or DVD. Thus, this structure responded to the primary design consideration of organising the examples according to key pedagogical functions in the electronic environment.

Figure 1 The DELTA home page

Figure 2 shows how the examples and supporting information are organised in each category. Staff are able to access DELTA via a guest login from a page on the Centre for Learning & Teaching Support website (www.cells.monash.edu.au). From this page, staff can request enrolment in the site if they wish to have personalised access.

Evaluating DELTA

Following the launch of DELTA, and after six months of usage, an evaluation plan was prepared to continue the cycle of iterative improvement which began with the first version of the site. Although teaching academics were envisaged as the target audience for DELTA, the expectation that DELTA would also be used by staff who supported them, including WebCT trainers, educational designers and technical support staff, meant that the showcase needed to be evaluated from the perspectives of each of these groups. It was also considered that valuable feedback could be obtained from other groups, such as peers in other institutions, policymakers at Monash University and new teaching staff. A further contextual issue in planning the evaluation was that no resources were available to implement a large-scale evaluation, but it was possible to schedule small evaluation components over time, which could be assembled, ultimately, to create a comprehensive evaluation report based on the findings of all components. This ‘modular’ approach also offered the advantage of selecting the most appropriate strategies to fit individual modules as well as the capacity to refine the concept of an action evaluation cycle (Rothman, 1997) to facilitate ongoing improvement of the site.
Consequently, six evaluation modules were identified, according to groups of respondents, as follows:

- Module 1 – DELTA users (excluding educational designers)
- Module 2 – educational designers who developed the site (a participatory evaluation)
- Module 3 – external peer reviewers
- Module 4 – example providers
- Module 5 – policy makers and associate deans (teaching)
- Module 6 – new teaching staff undertaking the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education

This evaluation approach accommodated the overlap between evaluating the site for its effectiveness in staff development, as well as recognising other factors that contribute to effectiveness, including the politics of technology adoption related to staff development. Inclusion of perspectives from multiple institutional stakeholders as well as external peers allowed for evaluation from a range of points of view, to address the multiplicity of factors affecting its actual and potential value.

The notion of an 'eclectic-mixed methods-pragmatic paradigm' for evaluation described by Reeves and Hedberg (2003), which they support as a means of handling the complexities of society and technology, provided a useful framework for considering the multiple aspects of this evaluation. Not only did it offer a pragmatic way of conceptualising the evaluation design to accommodate limitations in staff resources, it also allowed for a range of strategies from different inquiry paradigms to be selected for individual evaluation components of the basis of their appropriateness to the aspect under investigation, thereby contributing to the triangulation of results. For example, the Module 1 evaluation draws on the ‘positivist’ paradigm in its use of statistical and tracking data to analyse DELTA usage but also on the ‘interpretivist’ paradigm in seeking qualitative information from users. In contrast, the Module 2 evaluation (not covered in this paper) draws primarily on the ‘critical theory’ paradigm to uncover relevant information from educational designers through a reflective ‘action evaluation’ process. Details of the Module 1 evaluation follow, including some of the early evaluation results from DELTA users which are relevant to its refinement as a staff development resource.
Evaluation Module 1: DELTA users

Module 1 was designed to evaluate DELTA from a user perspective. Its key aims were to identify:

- reasons for visiting DELTA;
- perceived usefulness of DELTA as an exemplars site;
- specific examples, aspects of the examples, and useful supporting information;
- specific ways the site was used to improve teaching; and
- suggestions for improvement.

Three data-collection strategies were used: collection of tracking data available from the site; implementation of an anonymous online survey; and interviews of a small number of teaching and support staff who had used the site a number of times. Results are provided below.

Module 1 evaluation results

Tracking data

The inbuilt user tracking features of WebCT Vista provided access information, including the number of visits, time spent per visit and categories accessed, by two user groups: those who requested enrolment in the site and those who accessed the site via the guest login. Of those who requested enrolment in the site, the data collected covered a six-month period from the relaunch of DELTA in September 2004 to the start of the current study in March 2005. During this period, there were seventy-two requested enrolments. Of these, forty-three staff members had accessed the site and thirty-nine of them had actively used it – moving beyond the home page and viewing at least one example.

However, most usage occurred as a result of aggregated staff access via the guest login: 277 of 482 sessions (58%) and forty-one of sixty-six hours (62%) that the site had been accessed. This represented five months of guest access over the six-month period because the guest login was unavailable for the sixth month while login arrangements were upgraded to suit WebCT Vista Version 3. Usage via this login included demonstration of the site by educational designers and others. Of the identified users who had enrolled in DELTA, the average number of visits was $3.95 \pm 6.34$, in the range of 1 to 39. Seventeen staff had accessed DELTA once, with six staff accessing the site more than five times (see figure 3).

![Number of visits per enrollee](image)

**Figure 3** Number of visits per enrollee

Users accessed all six categories (figure 4), with the most frequently accessed category being Learning activities (scoring 34% of the total hits), followed by Communication (20%). The least
used category was Resources, with only 5.3 percent of the total hits. These figures include demonstrations of the site by educational designers and others.

![Category usage](image)

**Figure 4** Usage of the separate categories (‘pages’) within DELTA

DELTA enrollees were also categorised according to whether or not they had completed the University’s WebCT voluntary training program designed around a series of face-to-face workshops and complemented by print and online resources (Weaver, 2004). Matching DELTA enrollees against training records indicated that just over half the enrollees (40 out of 72) had attended formal centrally provided training in the use of WebCT (either Campus Edition or Vista or both), and the top eight users of the site (who logged 59% of the total sessions of the identified users) had all attended the training sessions.

**Anonymous online survey**

Sixty-eight enrolled users of the site currently employed at Monash were invited to respond to a questionnaire consisting of twenty-eight multiple choice, yes/no and open-ended items. Sixteen responses were received, giving a response rate of 24 per cent. Of the respondents, nine identified themselves as teaching academics, with the remaining seven being support staff (either non-teaching academic or technical staff). All claimed they were currently teaching or supporting web-based units, either in WebCT or via other methods, and all were using multimedia of some description (audio, video, animations or simulations) in their sites. Half the respondents had provided examples for inclusion in DELTA.

Results confirmed that initial expectations of DELTA were consistent across the respondents: they expected DELTA to provide a showcase of different online and offline examples of best-practice approaches, encompassing a broad range of teaching methods, styles and design models which offered inspiration and guidance for improvement of the users’ own practice.

Most of the respondents had accessed DELTA several times and their reasons for repeated visits were to revisit examples viewed earlier, explore further examples, and to demonstrate examples to their colleagues. Only one response (citing time constraints) was received to a question about a lack of repeated visits. Two respondents referred to unintuitive aspects of navigation and the category groupings. While half of the survey respondents had referred colleagues to DELTA, none had contacted any example providers for further information.

All five categories of examples were rated as highly useful or useful (scoring greater than 3 on a scale of 1 = least useful to 5 = most useful), with a majority claiming Learning activities to be the most useful (rating 4.1). Within each example, all sections rated at least 4.0. The most useful sections were the example itself (rating 4.6), and the learning and teaching issues (4.6) followed by the teacher’s story (4.3) and teaching tips (4.3).

Asked for further suggestions to improve DELTA, two respondents made positive comments about the site in its current form (‘Keep up the great work!!’; ‘I think it does a very good job at what it is designed to do: give examples of online teaching methods.’). One suggested better
searching and navigation, one suggested that access would be valuable for postgraduate students, and one stated: ‘It is a shame that people need to request to be added to the DELTA list in order to look at examples. I suspect that many of my colleagues directly involved in teaching did not bother to request access.’

Interviews

A standard open-ended set of questions was used with the six most frequent users enrolled in DELTA. Of the six interviewees, four were teaching academics from four different faculties (three of them experienced online teachers, one of whom now works in a non-faculty support role) and two were support staff (a WebCT trainer and a faculty-based web manager).

All six interviewees visited DELTA through curiosity to see what colleagues were implementing, and to look for ideas that could be transferred to their own discipline and teaching needs: ‘I was looking for inspiration – ideas of examples that I can modify to suit my own needs, and to see if someone has come up with ideas that I had not even considered’ (teaching academic – now support staff).

One teaching academic visited DELTA to look at the example he had provided. Staff found the concept of an exemplars showcase both important and relevant to their professional development: ‘It’s important to have a showcase … important to have a site like this that brings everyone together … and it’s good for the uni’ (teaching academic). In addition to these reasons, academic support staff visited DELTA to view management of projects in other faculties, to increase their personal repertoire of examples when presenting at training workshops, and to explore projects completed in the past.

The teaching academics found the most useful categories to be Communication, Assessment and Integrated approaches, and mentioned examples dealing with communication, role play, concept maps and a report writing tool as being particularly useful. In relation to the information that supported each example, they found the most useful sections to be the teacher’s story, the teaching tips and the development information. They acknowledged all examples as providing inspirational new ideas for online teaching and useful implementation information, one stating: ‘They are all useful, they all provided a perspective; [I can] modify them for my need. … why reinvent the wheel?’ The same view was expressed by support staff: ‘An understanding of the project, barriers and issues was good. Development information was useful … like a short precise snapshot.’ While all six interviewees selected examples at random to visit, one support staff member felt the categories did not have much meaning.

Although DELTA was acknowledged by all respondents to be useful, one comment placed it firmly in the category of a just-in-time resource: ‘Given everything else you are required to do, there is no time to go through these things in detail; you have it as a resource and get into it only when you need ideas and when you are ready to develop’ (teaching academic).

Additional information that teaching academics would like to see on the site included student responses to the example and a student perspective on how the learning need was met; strategies that failed and aspects that worked; evaluation information relating to each example; different options for finding examples quickly such as searching by colleague’s name, keyword, and example type; and more examples on assessment and evaluation. Further suggestions for improvement included:

- adding a designer’s section (‘I spent ages trying out different software for taking videos, so it would have been useful to find information on the options available.’);
- providing more examples; and
- promoting the site and other CeLTS services.

Discussion

Results from this evaluation of DELTA users indicated that it is fulfilling its intended purpose as a showcase of good practice in electronic teaching. Respondents found the concept of an exemplars showcase both important and relevant to their professional development. All teaching academics were positive about this resource, and found the examples and the supporting information useful when designing or considering improvements to their own online teaching. The support staff, while identifying its value for their colleagues, also found it useful in
monitoring e-learning resource developments university-wide. It was encouraging that
categories and examples which emphasised learner activity were highly regarded. Low usage of
the Resources category suggests a need for monitoring this part of the site: it may indicate a
need to highlight the role of this area, or to improve it. It also offers an opportunity to consider
whether alternative uses of the area might support the purpose of DELTA more effectively.

Increasing access to and usage of the site is a particular issue which emerged from this
evaluation. A recent initiative to give all staff automatic access to DELTA when logging in to
WebCT, together with promotional activities to raise awareness about the scope and
purpose of the site, may contribute to greater use of DELTA. As suggested by one of the
support staff respondents: ‘Promote the site better; they are great examples so inform
academics about it. Reading the objectives and the project outcomes will encourage them and a
lot of academics don’t know what’s out there so show them what colleagues have done.’

Automatic enrolment will also afford the advantage of providing comprehensive usage statistics
of all staff access. While some staff had demonstrated the site to their colleagues, no-one had
contacted any example providers for further information. This may mean that the information
provided with each example was sufficient, or indicate a reluctance to seek peer help, or be
simply because there is no explicit invitation to contact colleagues available on the site.
At this stage, enrolled user access has been mostly by support staff and teaching academics
experienced in online learning, highlighting the challenge to encourage more academic staff
new to teaching with technology to explore the site. These novice users may need more
guidance in exploring opportunities for electronic learning and teaching that are relevant to
them. If they are unlikely to value DELTA as much as experienced teaching academics or those
who have received training in the area, there is a need to explore ways of reaching them via
support staff or their more experienced colleagues. The high usage by some support staff was
unexpected given that this group was not previously identified as a target group. Therefore, the
site could be shaped to increase their use of it for assisting teaching academics inexperienced
in the area, rather than searching for new ways to make the site appealing to these users.

Further exploration of the links between attendance at WebCT training and the inclination to
explore resources such as DELTA may provide additional information to guide future directions.

Low access by novice users has been common to both versions of DELTA, despite the simpler
structure of the second version and little evidence of user difficulties with this new structure.
Comments on improving navigation appeared to relate to the practice of listing examples
according to their pedagogical role (for example, ‘Simulation for skill development’, ‘Situation
analysis activity’), making it often difficult for users to locate examples that are of most
relevance to them. Providing the ability to search according to specific criteria may improve the
usability of the site considerably.

Conclusion

The Module 1 evaluation results confirm DELTA as a valuable exemplars site for a range of
reasons, providing a useful resource for professional development for teaching academics and
teaching support staff at Monash University. The major issues for further development, based
on these evaluation results, relate to facilitating greater access to the site, devising ways to
promote it to make it a university resource for all staff involved in teaching with technology, and
improving searchability to make it a more convenient resource for users.

While the value of showcasing good practice to promote staff development is established, it is
equally important to evaluate such showcases from several perspectives to maintain their
relevance and usefulness to all stakeholders. The Module 1 evaluation has built on the quality
improvement process begun with the first version of the site which will be continued as further
modules are completed. The two phases of development thus far have confirmed the value of
an iterative, reflective approach to adjust and refine the site to meet user needs. Most concerns
identified in the 2003 evaluation have now been addressed and objectives specified in the 2004
redevelopment have been met, though there is still room for further integration of the site with
WebCT training, perhaps through greater engagement with support staff as discussed above. In
improving the searchability of the site, it will be possible to select examples in terms of
appropriateness to off-campus teaching, on-campus flexible teaching and transnational
teaching, providing an opportunity to analyse groups of examples which have been found to be suitable in different learning contexts. Along with the results from other evaluation modules, this will be valuable in informing the first stage of additional resources to complement DELTA, as well as ongoing development of the site itself. Concurrently, more examples will also be added to the site as more innovative practices are implemented across the university.

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References


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