The Challenges Facing Staff Development in Promoting Quality Online Teaching

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This article describes the evolution of an academic professional development program, related to the use of WebCT in teaching programs, and discusses the challenges that have arisen for the members of the staff development team since the original implementation of the program. The training program begins with face-to-face workshops, covering pedagogical issues as well as technical and practical aspects of the software. The workshop series has matured in its format and content in response to staff requirements and demands, as well as software upgrades. This article describes the ongoing evolution of the workshop program, and discusses the changes the staff developer role has undergone, in relation to strategic provision of support for academic staff and contributions to organisational policy development.

Introduction

Monash University (http:www.monash.edu.au) is Australia’s largest university, with over 50,000 students and 5,000 staff, spread over eight campuses on three continents, and with a strong history of both face-to-face and distance education. During 2001-2002, Monash adopted WebCT as its centrally supported Learning Management System (LMS). Incorporation of online teaching has not been mandated; rather, this has been left to individual staff and/or organisations within the university to adopt as they feel ready.

As with other universities, the dilemma for university staff is that while these LMS environments provide an apparently uncomplicated interface for incorporating a range of web-based communication, content and assessment tools, they may inadvertently allow and even encourage practices that are not considered high quality teaching in higher education (see Chickering &
Gamson, 1991). Our challenge is to encourage quality teaching practices within the LMS through training that seamlessly integrates the technical skills with pedagogical and curricular practices (Ellis & Phelps, 2000), and does not promote transfer of existing poor teaching practices to the online environment (Bates, 2000). Academic staff who may have poor computer and information literacy skills, as well as few of the information management skills needed to effectively use a LMS to support their teaching, must not only learn how to operate within these environments but develop an informed critical perspective of their use of the LMS in teaching in a variety of modes (Fox & Herrmann, 2000). For some staff, this is a frightening prospect, (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998), and one which they may need friendly and personal encouragement to surmount.

An Integrated Approach to Professional Development

During 2001, an integrated staff development program was designed, with input from a wide range of stakeholders across the university community (Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002). The key objective of the training program was to adopt diverse approaches to academic development, ranging from generic workshops catering to large numbers to staff, to mentor networks operating within faculties and/or schools. Accordingly, the training program was situated in an academic development unit, rather than in an information technology training center, to enable the involvement of academic staff with strong backgrounds in the pedagogical aspects of teaching with technology, and to encourage high levels of discussion centered around quality educational outcomes.

No one type of activity was seen as sufficient in itself to meet all of our objectives, an approach similar to that taken by many other institutions (O’Reilly, Ellis & Newton, 2000). The training program had to incorporate a variety of activities that ultimately encouraged learning about WebCT in situ with colleagues who wished to improve their teaching through the use of online information and communication tools.

Components of the Training Program

A summary of the different components of each of the staff development program’s strategies, with examples, is illustrated in Table 1. The aim was to provide staff with the flexibility to learn about online teaching and the use of the LMS in ways that better suited them and their circumstances. Some staff were content to use the online materials, sometimes accompanied by on-call support without attending workshops. However, other staff enjoyed interaction with training staff and their peers, and were appreciative of the human contact and flexibility of support provided during and after the workshops.
Implementation of the Program

As with most academic development programs, workshops were originally scheduled for non-teaching periods to optimise the chances of academics being able to find a time and venue convenient to their own requirements, but several series have been conducted during semester at larger campuses to meet the high demand and to reduce waiting lists. All campuses of Monash University have been included in the face-to-face workshop program, including Monash Malaysia and Monash South Africa. For all Australian campuses, two members of the training team participated in each workshop, with one person presenting the workshop and another available for one-on-one assistance for any workshop participant who falls behind or to deal with any technical issues that may arise.

Table 1
Structure of Elements of the Program (Modified from Weaver, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generic workshop program</td>
<td>Sequential series of 4 workshops, each building on the previous content:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Using WebCT as a student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Design principles, Communication &amp; Collaboration tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adding content to WebCT</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Online assessment activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customised training</td>
<td>Training programs designed to suit local or specific demands, conducted</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>when and where required, for example:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Helpdesk staff</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Library staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conducted at specific locations (e.g., South Africa, Malaysia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online resources</td>
<td>A set of accessible, easy-to-read manuals (produced by a third party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Catering for both staff &amp; student level access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Available in both Word and pdf formats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A set on online teaching manuals plus short fact sheets and technical tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Available as handouts in workshops or online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty or School support</td>
<td>Training staff working with groups in Faculties or Schools at a range of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td>different levels, including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Faculty committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Local WebCT support groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Curriculum development teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Template development teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-call support</td>
<td>Provided until a centrally supported helpdesk could be implemented.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation in the workshop program is voluntary and free of charge to all staff. Some consideration was given to requiring attendance at training before allowing staff to teach online (and this strategy has been adopted by one faculty at Monash University), but generally we did not wish to force staff into a mode of training that did not suit all learning styles. Hence, staff who wished to learn by themselves with the assistance of online resources were supported in this approach.

For the first workshop in the program (Table 1), staff were encouraged to participate as students in a previously developed WebCT unit. To accomplish this, staff were provided with a generic WebCT account and were required to interact as a student within the same unit. This arrangement allows for an introduction to key features of the LMS at the same time as introducing academic staff to the online student perspective – for many of the participants this was their first exposure to online learning.

For subsequent workshops, each participant was given their own online unit to develop in a structured manner, but they were also enrolled as students in other participants’ WebCT courses. This organization of WebCT accounts allowed staff to work on tasks in small groups, where they could view and interact each other’s work. The organisation of the WebCT courses impacted on what and how participants learned within the workshops.

Printed resource materials incorporating consideration of teaching and learning issues with local examples were developed to complement the workshops, and some of the material contained in these has been integrated into the online WebCT courses that are used in the workshops. Shorter fact sheets covering more technical issues or handy hints have been developed as required, and are distributed within workshops as well as available from a central website.

In addition to the standard workshop program, customised workshops were provided on request to specific groups of both academic and general staff across the university. These groups included special interest groups, for example, library and helpdesk staff, who did not require training in design features of WebCT, but required in-depth knowledge of issues students may face when using WebCT. Nearly half of the training provided during 2002 was under the category of customised workshops.

**Outcomes from the Implementation**

Since the commencement of the Monash University WebCT training program in November 2001, nearly 2000 staff have participated in the workshop program. Details of the evaluation of the generic training workshops over 2001-2003 have been published (Weaver, Button & Gilding 2002; Weaver 2003). Briefly, participants are generally happy with the structure and format of the workshops and rate their satisfaction in the program highly (satisfaction ratings during Semester 2 2003 were 1.73 for Workshop 1.
[n= 68] and 1.70 [n= 88] for the subsequent workshops, on a scale of 1 = Extremely Satisfied, 5 = Extremely Dissatisfied). The hands-on format is very popular, as is the presence of two instructors in the room. Most participants thought they gained a good overall understanding of what WebCT was, and a good knowledge of the range of functions and tools available for teaching. Many respondents commented on the enthusiasm and knowledge of the presenters, and enjoyed the discussions on issues of online teaching that arose during the workshops, and the chance to ask questions and receive immediate answers. Issues raised included concerns about the timing of the workshops (some workshops were scheduled during exam-marking periods), and concerns about ongoing support once staff commenced their online teaching.

Beyond the generic training workshops, members of the staff development team participated as a committee member or consultant on a number of faculty or school based e-learning networks. Whilst some of these networks are faculty level committees, guiding the online teaching of the faculty, others are more project-based. During the first year of the program, some faculties were highly proactive in forming such committees (usually due to the enthusiasm of a local early adopter in a senior position), but others were slow in recognizing the need for such groups and in organizing their structure. Accordingly, invitations to participate in these groups arose in an ad hoc manner, and resulted in support being provided unevenly across the institution.

In addition, a separate, centrally-funded WebCT Help Desk was established, primarily for student use, but this support has now been extended to staff. Members of the training team continue to provide high-level support to helpdesk staff, and collaborated with help desk staff to prepare manuals, including common questions and problems experienced by staff at Monash.

**Issues Arising from the Staff Development Program**

As discussed earlier, the initial program was implemented across all campuses of Monash during 2001-2002, with enormous numbers of staff participating (nearly 1000 staff, from a total of 5000 staff across the institution). During early 2003, and based on a comprehensive evaluation, members of the staff development team took time to identify issues arising from the training program, to reassess its success for our key stakeholders, and to identify strategies for ensuring its ongoing quality and relevance. Several issues were identified:

- The changing nature of workshop participants; as the “early adopters” have gained experience in online teaching and are looking for more challenges, while more members of the “mainstream majority” are beginning to move their teaching online (either fully or to complement their face-to-face teaching).
• The need for further, personalized ongoing support for academic staff, beyond participation in the central training program.
• The need for more strategic use of the staff development team in policy development and quality assurance programs.
• Implementation of incentives to encourage best practices in online teaching.

Each of these challenges will be discussed separately.

Changing Nature of Workshop Attendees

During the first year of the program, workshop attendees could be generally classified as “early adopters” (Rogers, 1995), who were confident and enthusiastic about moving to the online environment, and found technology fun and challenging (Jacobsen, 2000). As the program moved into its second year, more workshop participants could be categorized as belonging to the “mainstream majority” (Anderson, 1998), who are more likely to wait for proof of the benefits of online learning (Burdett, 2003), or who might harbour concerns about the level of technical skills (and their own ability to acquire these) required to teach online. Evidence for this change in confidence (and sometimes competence) in the workshop participants was found in responses to evaluation surveys (a decrease in comments about workshops being too slow, a corresponding increase, albeit small, in complaints that the pace of the workshops was too fast, and an increase in comments about information overload), as well as anecdotal observations from the workshop presenters.

The staff development team responded to the different needs of these groups in different ways. To accommodate members of the mainstream majority, the content of the workshops was cut slightly, and more emphasis placed on the use of printed manuals for later reference, in an attempt to alleviate the genuine complaints of information overload. To challenge the early adopters and to respond to requests from faculty and department groups, an additional series of advanced WebCT workshops were developed and implemented during 2003.

These two half-day advanced workshops were designed for staff who have completed the existing series of four workshops and who have gained familiarity with using WebCT. The intention was to take a problem-solving approach in these workshops, encouraging staff to come along with problems they may have encountered, or to bring their own materials where appropriate. The workshops are designed to include embedded discussions about pedagogical issues raised in online teaching and learning, beyond merely the technical expertise required to use WebCT. Development of a Managing Your WebCT Class workshop has been described in further detail (Weaver & Kish, 2003), and covers issues such as identifying struggling stu-
Ongoing Personalized Support for Teaching Staff

Despite the best intentions of a committed unit of staff developers, it is simply not possible for a team of three individuals to provide personal support to all teaching staff who request it across such a large institution. During the first year of the training program, such a service was provided (although not advertised) to all who requested it, but most of these teaching staff were the early adopters who required minimal assistance, and a flow-on mentoring effect was observed in some areas from this support. In several cases, a staff developer worked closely with a small group or individual to advise on the design of their online unit, to assist them develop strategies for their online teaching, and to provide consultation about evaluation. In some cases, the collaboration led to publications (e.g., Wells, 2003) or to presentations in showcases of online teaching, allowing teaching staff to become role models for their colleagues who had not yet considered moving their teaching to online.

However, such an approach is not sustainable, and more strategic use of the staff developer’s time was required to foster collaborative groups in faculties and schools. Encouraging staff to work collaboratively as a pedagogical strategy is consistent with current views about academic work and particularly important in the context of staff development and educational technologies (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Kandelier, 2000; Spratt, Palmer & Coldwell, 2000). One challenge inherent in this objective is to overcome the perception of intellectual academic activity as centered on and controlled by the individual, which potentially limits...
opportunities for effective collaboration (Ellis & Phelps, 2000). There is a profuse literature that explores the place of action learning as a form of academic development and quality improvement (see Kember, 2001 for a recent review in the context of educational technology).

The current strategy is to actively work towards the establishment of such action-learning groups in local discipline or campus areas, often calling on people who have been previous recipients of individual support. In some areas, these groups are active, productive and supportive of local initiatives, but mostly, these groups rely on the enthusiasm of an individual to keep them in motion. In other areas, staff developers are taking on this role, at least during the establishment phase. It is hoped that as adoption of online teaching penetrates to more teaching staff that our involvement in these groups can drop to consultation only.

**The Contribution of Academic Professional Development to Policy Development and Quality Assurance.**

Ideally, the introduction of new educational technologies and strategies in teaching should involve academic discipline areas re-visiting their pedagogical models and practices, informed by contemporary literature. To support this process, members of the training team have strategically initiated liaisons with the numerous faculty and department-based committees and groups operating across the campuses. Members of the team are now active members on many of these committees, allowing us to use our experience to contribute to policy decisions and to support curriculum initiatives in line with the university’s strategic directions. An important benefit of participation in such committees is the opportunity for relationship-building and collegiality with faculty members.

Initially, our involvement with these groups arose primarily from contact with proactive local staff, which resulted in uneven support across different faculties and schools. During 2004, the training team has attempted to redress this by actively approaching the remaining faculties and schools, offering assistance on such committees. Success in this strategy has been mixed, mainly due to the huge differences in the organisational structure of these areas. Some faculties operate as a cohesive unit, and have welcomed advances from our team. Others operate as a loose set of independent schools or departments, and are reluctant to initiate policies at a faculty level. The small number of staff in the training team does not currently permit active participation in so many different groups. In other areas, it has taken time for senior management to recognize the need for policy-making and direction in the area of online teaching. In these cases, the training team has adopted a strategy of gently approaching these groups again each year, with some minor success to date.
Incentives to Encourage Quality

A further activity of the training team has been to initiate and/or support the development of incentives to encourage the use of best practices in online teaching. During 2003, Monash University introduced a program of Unit Innovation Grants, where staff could apply for small grants to assist them integrate online learning in their campus-based programs. A criterion of these grants was for the successful applicant to collaborate with staff from the Higher Education Development Unit in their project, which gives us the opportunity to encourage quality student-centered teaching innovations.

In addition, the author is currently Chair of a staff organization, Higher Education Partnerships in Communication and Information Technology (HEPCIT), which organizes events to showcase exemplars in the use of technology in teaching. These events include a biannual conference, monthly forums, and occasional presentations from international guests. Staff who present their work at such events can use this as evidence of teaching excellence and service to the university community in their promotion applications.

Additional ad hoc presentations and seminars are hosted by the training team across all campuses as often as possible. The objective in hosting such events is to demonstrate a range of teaching strategies and innovations, to encourage staff to consider different methods when designing their own curricula.

DISCUSSION

The WebCT staff development program is necessarily dynamic and evolutionary. We have been required to cater for not only the mainstream majority of workshop attendees, but also to provide challenging staff development opportunities for the early adopters who are now experienced WebCT users. At the same time, all workshop programs and associated resources must be updated regularly to accommodate new versions of software.

The current workshop program has been very successful with providing an introduction to not only the learning management system at Monash (WebCT), but also an introduction to online teaching and learning, the first such experience for many staff. Plans to extend this experience to more in-depth strategies for online teaching are underway.

At the same time, the training team members are becoming more embedded in different faculty, school and department groups. In some areas, members are active in committees making policy about online teaching and learning, and in other areas, we are project members providing ongoing support to groups developing online teaching resources. Initially, invitations to join these groups arose ad hoc from contacts made during the generic training workshops or by team members initiating contact with targeted committees, but involvement in these groups has become more systematic and is being encouraged at all levels across the university. Our support for Unit Innova-
tion Grants, is also providing us with avenues to work with more staff across the institution.

We believe the voluntary nature of the adoption of WebCT at Monash University has worked well for the majority of staff. Forcing staff to incorporate online teaching when not appropriate or when staff do not feel ready for such a change was considered counter-productive to the supportive and collegial atmosphere we wished to foster. One faculty and some departments within other faculties have mandated the use of WebCT to support on-campus teaching, with the result that some staff develop a negative attitude to being forced into a teaching style they are not comfortable with, and the encouragement of online units with little or no engagement from the teaching staff. Consequently, the institutional approach is that staff are able to choose if and when they adopt the new technology, and accordingly, if and when they participate in the workshop program.

One outcome of this strategy is that students are faced with only some of their subjects being supported by online units. Demand from students for increased online resources and activities appears to have provided a greater incentive to encourage the uptake of WebCT and a more positive attitude to teaching online than mandating the use of WebCT at an institutional level could have achieved.

This approach has also meant that some staff are designing and teaching online with little or no training. While most of these staff have managed well with the technology, some issues of quality in the teaching have been identified, and addressing this is likely to be the next major challenge facing the staff development team.

CONCLUSIONS

After the first two years of providing a professional development program in online teaching, feedback indicates that this program has been very successful in its original objectives of introducing staff to Monash University’s learning management system, while also introducing staff to the pedagogical issues involved. However, it has proven necessary for the program to continually evolve, to further promote discussions of best practice in online teaching, to cater for different staff requirements, to provide the highest quality ongoing support to staff, and to accommodate changes in the software environment across the institution.

A program of this extent, supporting such large numbers of staff, can only maintain its relevance by the training team being highly proactive in responding to perceived needs across the institution, flexible in their approach to dealing with different groups, and very supportive to staff at all levels. Our ongoing approach and collaborative work with our colleagues in faculties and departments continues to be iterative and diverse in a way that we hope sees
the use of WebCT continue to evolve from educational considerations and professional development out of the needs of staff engaged in real work.

**Postscript**

Since the acceptance of this paper, a review of the Centre for Learning & Teaching Support (CeLTS) at Monash University has resulted in the closure of this Centre, and hence the termination of the centralised staff development program for online teaching. Some larger faculties have implemented smaller, more localised programs, but most staff no longer have access to expertise in this area.

**References**


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