

The design and development of a suite of online professional development resources for academic staff: Framing the project

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Professional development for teaching staff at Massey University has been comprehensively remodelled in order to foster teachers as “future makers”, exponents of models of teaching and learning that are suitable for effective 21st century knowledge creation and distribution. Given that the remodelling programme has strong support at significant levels of the university’s leadership, it has a high chance of succeeding in its aims. This paper traces the initial stages of one project in the programme: the production of a suite of online resources featuring successful academic staff discussing aspects of their teaching. Loosely modelled on other online teaching development videos, the videos in the suite were envisaged to provide staff new to teaching, and those wishing to improve their teaching practices, with a readily accessible, practical explanation of how some of Massey University’s leading practitioners operate. To help staff understanding at a deeper level, the suite included a series of brief information guides (‘flyers’) aimed at helping staff understand the theoretical terms underpinning the video discussions. This is an initial report on an on-going project.

Keywords: Teaching staff, professional development, videos, flyers, Massey University

Introduction

The environment of further and higher education is changing in response to economic pressures, government policies and changing behaviours influenced by greater ownership of new technologies. In turn, this is encouraging institutions to review key aspects of their provision and to reassess what is delivered, to whom and in what ways (JISC 2011, 6).

Increased demands placed on tertiary teachers due in part to the increasing emphasis on the use of digital technologies, and in part to the shift in accompanying pedagogies, were factors that led to a recent reassessment of how professional development for teaching staff occurred at Massey University (“Massey”). The challenge for Massey, as with many universities, was to create a sustainable model of professional development that utilises the features of the digital educational environment in a way that is both inspiring and motivating to those participating. By combining face to face professional development with a suite of online digital resources, Massey hoped to inspire and motivate academic staff to transform their practice and re-conceptualise their learning designs in ways that are increasingly seen as critical to facilitating teaching and learning in the student-centred and technology-enriched learning spaces of the future (see for example Steel & Andrews, 2012).

The Massey University response

The challenge of providing a sustainable model of professional development that meets the on-going and evolving day-to-day needs of academic teaching staff led to shifts in both the underlying philosophy and the provision of staff professional development at Massey. The new model for the Massey Teaching and Learning Centre could be characterised as a shift from what Holt, Palmer and Challis (2011, p.6-7) label the “traditional paradigm” to what they describe as the “new emerging” paradigm, which positions such centres “at the heart” of teaching and learning within the institution rather than on the margins. The remodelling provoked a programme of change initiatives at all levels of the university, ranging from new policy documents to shifts in organisational structure and everyday practice. Significant initiatives at institutional level included:

- the development of policy documents that impacted directly on the expected provision and outcomes of staff development (*The Road to 2020, The Teaching and Learning Development Framework*)
- the establishment of College Directors of Teaching and Learning whose role included working closely with academic staff and staff developers to identify and provide appropriate and timely professional development

- the defining of a Massey University model of teaching and learning
- the restructuring of professional development services from a centralised to a 'hub and spoke' model, with regional centres established to meet immediate teaching and learning needs as and when they arise
- the integration of student learning services into core business of each regional centre. This change reflected the Massey philosophy that teaching and learning are in essence inseparable, and as such should focus on the needs of learners as well as those of teachers.

Such institutional change initiatives, with their positive impact on support for teaching staff, are evidence of the kind of distributive leadership that Steel and Andrews assert bodes well for successful change in teacher practice: "Changes in teacher practice require different levels of distributive leadership that can empower, enable and support teachers" (2012, 244).

In its policy document *Teaching and Learning Development Framework: Defining Directions for 2012-2015*, Massey established guidelines for how to "fully exploit opportunities provided by new digital media" and "provide enhanced professional development and lifelong learning opportunities for staff" (Massey University, 2012b, 6). The strategy further elucidated the university's core principles of teaching development in terms of its effectiveness, range, scope, and capacity for provision that was both multi-faceted and grounded in meaningful contexts. Acknowledging staff as lifelong learners, the strategy was explicit about expected delivery modes and purpose. Based on "a philosophy of providing customised and flexibly delivered teaching development that can meet staff needs on request" the strategy was intended to "model and embed the use of educational technology in ways that promote a more collaborative, interactive, media rich and personalised learning experience for academic staff" (Massey University, 2012b, 6).

The underpinning philosophy that informed the restructuring of the Massey professional development model combined with explicit directives around delivery found in the Teaching and Learning Framework (2012b) saw the implementation of a new approach to delivering professional development for teaching staff. Customised workshops and one-on-one consultations concentrating on the pedagogy of educational technologies, blended delivery, and curriculum design and delivery replaced generic workshops around teaching practice. Not only were these new offerings tailored to the needs of new tutors and lecturers, they were also able to be utilised by experienced teaching staff looking for new ideas to reinvigorate their teaching. It meant that academic staff could access discipline-based workshops that supported their teaching, just-in-time, as and when required.

Similarly, recognising that learning to teach also occurs informally (Ling, 2009; Remmik, Karm, Haamer & Lepp, 2011), staff were encouraged to talk about issues and aspects of their practice with their colleagues through a range of interdisciplinary professional conversations facilitated by the Centres for Teaching and Learning. Academic staff were also urged to participate in peer mentoring activities with both academic colleagues and teaching consultants, where reflective practice was encouraged through the sharing of positive teaching experiences, and the exchange of advice and support for challenging and/or problematic teaching and learning situations. Such informal building of a network of peers valuing feedback and reflection is noted as an important underpinning element in sustainable change in teaching practice (Steel & Andrews, p. 254).

Complementing the face-to-face services, and in response to the requirement of the Teaching and Learning Framework to model and embed educational technologies, Massey's National Centre for Teaching and Learning offered a suite of less formal, online modules that provided staff with the opportunity to engage with professional development materials. This three-pronged suite comprised:

- an introduction to the use of Massey's Moodle-based learning management system
- a series of modules on the pedagogy and advanced operations of teaching online
- a series of staff development modules purchased from Epigeum concentrating on more generalist teaching practices and selected as appropriate for the Massey environment.

The project to produce a further suite of brief videos and accompanying flyers was thus the fourth prong of these online resources. Intended to enable academic staff to access the philosophies, ideas and experiences of their colleagues, the project provided a vehicle for selected skilled Massey teaching staff to share their practice both with their university colleagues, and with the wider educational sector via the Massey University website. Such resources could be utilised by educators as online simulations of professional teaching and learning conversations, and as stimulus and inspiration around specific areas of teaching and learning.

The development of a new resource

While the production of online videos and flyers to serve as a resource for professional development in teaching is far from an original idea, it has proven benefits. Providing teachers with new ideas and information,

particularly around teaching pedagogies, in a readily accessible web-based format has proved to be a useful and successful teaching development tool worldwide (McIntyre, 2011). Although such a project requires careful planning, particularly in the pre-production stages, it was hoped that the bite-sized videos and flyers would be easily consumed as and when required, particularly by those McIntyre (2011, 10) describes as “time poor teachers feeling resentful and overburdened” by institutional demands on their time. Massey’s goal was to ensure that each resource would meet a specific pedagogical need, and highlight to staff that the content was not abstracted theory, but showcases of practices already happening in their institution, by colleagues they were working alongside. The resources were to be practical, concentrating on real world applications, and largely free of subject-specific references to enable easy transferral of skills between disciplines.

Planning for the videos began with the inclusion of two unique, unrelated projects in the 2012 National Centre for Teaching and Learning *Priority Initiatives Plan*: the “Spotlight on Teaching videos” project and the “In a Nutshell” flyers project. Both videos and flyers were intended to be displayed and downloaded from the Massey website. However, the obvious synergies between the projects led project leaders to quickly agree that the advantages of combining both into a more complete package were too great to ignore and they were consequently positioned closely together. It was recognised that there was a need to integrate the content, with the flyers becoming the theoretical underpinning of the (practice-based) videos. This reciprocity would enable the easy cross referencing of material from one format to the other. If a theoretical term arose within a video, it was important that a quick and easy definition was available from the flyers. Similarly the videos should contextualise underpinning theory found in the flyers.

Deciding on topics

The starting point for establishing what topics should be prioritised in the videos and flyers was the daily practice of the project leaders and authors of this paper, Teaching and Online Consultants at the Massey University Albany Campus. We were guided firstly by our perceptions of professional teaching development needs and of which resources would thus be most useful in our daily practice with academic staff. We also needed to consider the ‘big picture’: how the resources would fit with the overall staff professional development approach and offerings, and how the resources would be used. Key questions for consideration included:

- What professional development themes and issues were arising regularly in dealings with teaching staff, as well as in conversations with learning consultants about student issues?
- What tools would be useful when working with teaching staff, i.e. what could be given to staff as a “takeaway” from any professional conversations and/or workshops?
- Where did topics fit in terms of the domains and criteria for the Ako Aotearoa National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards (Spiller, D. et al, 2011), used as a framework for the Massey model of teaching?
- How would these resources reinforce teaching and learning techniques necessary for the 21st century, ie active, flexible and social constructivist learning that models and embeds the use of educational technology?

With these questions in mind it was possible to work through further details around which audience the resources were to target, and the purpose and approach of the resources. It was agreed that the resources would target multiple audiences and provide a showcase for effective practice occurring at Massey. Three target audiences were identified: Massey staff new to teaching; Massey academic staff looking for ways to change their practice, particularly those attempting the move to blended delivery; and the wider public, particularly tertiary educators. It was evident that, through highlighting specific acts of teaching, and articulating effective pedagogy, one main purpose of the videos and flyers would be to provide a useful resource for Teaching Consultants to “surface and resolve tension around teacher beliefs” – a significant first step towards change in teacher practice (Steel & Andrews, 2011, p. 247). They would also support Teaching Consultants’ demonstration of and promotion of ways to provide the kinds of “participatory, facilitated learning environment” essential for 21st century teaching and learning. (Diaz et al., 2009, in Steel & Andrews, 2011, p. 246). To remain consistent with the Massey approach to teaching, topics needed to be organised according to the Ako Aotearoa domains - Design for Learning, Facilitating Learning, Assessing Student Learning, Evaluating Teaching and Learning, Professional Development and Leadership. Finally, the videos and flyers needed to be closely aligned, with practice articulated in the videos demonstrating concepts in the flyers. It was important that the flyers offer an easily accessible, comprehensive glossary of key concepts and cover a wide range of teaching and learning terms and topics so that academic staff could gain basic information quickly, including how and where to get further information and help.

Video design

The format of the videos was described in general terms in Massey's priority initiatives document (2012b). They were to be brief (five to ten minutes each) and feature interviews with leading Massey practitioners talking about innovative aspects of their teaching practice. However, the document provided no definition or specific details of specific topics these experts were to talk about. Having considered established general parameters for topics, based on our daily practice as Teaching Consultants, the next step was to establish criteria for deciding specific topics for videos and flyers. The video interviews needed to cover:

- genuine teaching and learning strategies that met Massey expectations and desired outcomes
- demonstrable, specific and effective acts of teaching
- key content that matched the theoretical underpinnings of the flyers
- domains used as criteria for the Ako Aotearoa National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards

Video topics were thus drawn from the Ako Aotearoa domains using guidelines for effective teaching practice articulated in the *Portfolio pointers* (2011) to flesh them out. For example, points around encouraging active learning, creating and fostering unique learning environments and responding to feedback, guidelines specified in the Design for Learning domain, were combined to form the video entitled "Engaging students in the learning process." These points were then used as the basis for interview questions focussed on key areas of content. For ease of management and consistency, it was decided that there would be five open-ended questions per topic. At this stage feedback was sought from colleagues within both the National and campus-based Centres for Teaching and Learning on appropriateness of topics, key content and questions.

Identification of suitable participating staff was the next task. Selection criteria included those who had won internal Massey and/or external national teaching and learning excellence awards, staff that the Albany Teaching Consultants had worked with and thought displayed exceptional teaching skills, and those recommended by colleagues through targeted feedback. These people were then approached via email to gauge their willingness to participate, and those who expressed interest were sent a more comprehensive outline of what was involved including: the topic of the video, an outline of the key content they would be interviewed about, and the five key questions they would be required to answer.

Flyer design

The layout "look and feel" and content of the flyers were developed in close consultation with Massey's Materials Production Unit and the Centres for Teaching and Learning of each campus. Using a discussion forum in the Centres for Teaching and Learning online learning environment, both Learning and Teaching Consultants gave initial feedback on three draft flyers over a period of two weeks before any further development was undertaken. This process identified key elements to incorporate in the design of all subsequent flyers. The process also created a norm of, and process for, on-going feedback and collaboration which in turn enhanced a sense of shared ownership of the flyers among all Learning and Teaching Consultants. Such ownership is essential if the resources are to be used widely and effectively by these professionals in their day-to-day dealings with academic teaching staff.

Where to from here?

Planning was completed and videoing commenced in June. The first two videos and accompanying flyers were ready for use by October. By the time of the paper presentation, the authors expected to be able to report orally on progress with production, deployment of the resources, feedback received and initial evaluations. Given the project's alignment with principles for sustainable change creation including strong support at significant leadership levels, they expected to be able to report positive progress in their quest to support teachers' development into future makers for Massey University.

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