BOUNDARY CROSSING IN A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

The take-up of information and communications technologies (ICT) across the university sector is challenging the work practices of many who work in higher education, not just those of the teachers. Communities within universities are engaging in new work as they respond to the challenges of ICT. This work includes discussion and negotiation of the policies and procedures that provide the framework for the use of ICT. Academic developers may be fortuitously located to facilitate this task because of their participation in multiple communities of practice spanning the university. Facilitation of this work requires new work practices and skills of the academic developers themselves.

Keywords
Academic development, professional development, Information and communications technologies (ICT), work practices.

Introduction

The take-up of information and communications technologies (ICT) for teaching and learning across the university sector is challenging the work practices of many who work in higher education, not just those of the teachers. Within a few short years these technologies have become mainstream within the university. Providing the appropriate levels of support for ICT requires increasingly complex and sophisticated operational and administrative processes, and ways of working. These technologies are also changing the nature of the work of general staff engaged in administrative support of students within faculties and departments, and in central units with infrastructural and administrative responsibilities for support services.

This paper argues that supporting ICT requires academic developers to work in new ways involving boundary crossing in multiple communities of practice. A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Motivation

Much of what has been written about ICT for teaching and learning focuses on the changes that teachers are making to their courses as they adapt and extend their teaching activities to support students engaged in a variety of learning activities. Not much has been written about the professional development of academic developers who are engaged in helping teachers with ICT. This contribution to the literature on professional development practice has been motivated in part by the call for more research,

> Conspicuously absent from this work is research on how professional developers themselves must change to enact these new, more complex forms of teacher assistance. We know little about the challenges that individuals accustomed to providing one-time workshops or university-based courses will encounter as they attempt to transform their practice to become more responsive to

the new demands. The lack of scholarship leaves us with no direct guidance as to how to frame studies of the development of professional developers. (Stein, Smith & Silver, 1999)

Academic developers have traditionally been concerned with educational development, typically manifested in their work with teachers on issues directly related to teaching practice, or more broadly, in program development and renewal. One of the more unexpected outcomes of the widespread utilisation of ICT is the higher visibility to students and staff of the administrative processes required to support the more flexible approaches to teaching and learning afforded by ICT.

Academic developers can find themselves operating as intermediaries, between teachers and the IT department areas supporting flexible learning, in the discussion and negotiation of policies, procedures and practices that are evolving in response to organisational stresses arising from ICT use. Academic developers may be fortuitously located for this task because of their participation in multiple communities of practice spanning the university. An important aspect of a community of practice is the negotiation of meaning that takes place as a newcomer gradually makes the transition to accepted member of the community. I use the term boundary crossing here to refer to the explicit participation in multiple communities for the negotiation of meaning between communities. For example, an academic developer is boundary crossing when negotiating with the IT department on behalf of teachers in regard to the procedures teachers follow for set-up of online subject areas.

In some ways this represents new work for academic developers whose traditional focus is on issues of teaching and learning. But this wider view of academic developer practice is consistent with calls for changes in the work practices of teachers and of academic developers (see for example, Brew & Boud, 1996; Stein, et al., 1999; McLoughlin, 2000)

I will briefly describe three communities of practice and provide examples of the concerns that lead to new work for community participants.

New work for IT departments

Universities have long had in-house IT departments supporting the internal networks and housekeeping applications associated with any large entity. In many cases the services offered by these departments have been indirectly involved in supporting students through student records systems, on-campus computer labs, network availability and a variety of other services. The widespread take-up of ICT has involved these departments, often for the first time, in the direct provision of the university's core business of teaching and learning.

Whereas previously the interruption of central services for scheduled maintenance and changes only occasionally impacted students directly engaged in learning activities, there is now a considerable, and highly visible, potential impact on students and teachers who may not appreciate the complex challenges faced by central units as they carry out their duties in support of the university's business. These challenges require the establishment of policies and procedures that balance the needs of teachers and students for a stable and responsive ICT environment, whilst also providing the operational flexibility needed for the IT department to meet the demands made of it. IT staff at UTS are encouraged to participate in all professional development activities and seminars aimed at engaging teachers with issues of good teaching practice in ICT, to encourage a deepening understanding of the concerns of teachers, and to capitalize on any insights generated of the ways in which processes might be made more effective.

New work for teachers

This short paper cannot hope to be comprehensive in any way in talking about new work for teachers particularly in those areas relating to teaching and learning with ICT. I will highlight just one example of new administrative work for teachers to give substance to the claim I make that the take-up of ICT is generating new work.

Student enrolment in online courses is based on information extracted from the student records system that reflects the official state of a student's enrolment. If a student is not enrolled in a subject when the extract is taken then they will not appear in the online course. The normal start-of-semester volatility of

student enrolments, which is due to students changing their program by adding or dropping subjects, can take up to 6 weeks to settle down, leading to many cases where students are unable to participate in their online courses whilst they wait for their accounts to be added. In conventional face-to-face teaching activities the teacher may not even be aware that there is an issue with enrolments. Students can continue to attend class and hand in assessment tasks throughout semester. Sorting out the enrolment is an issue between the student and the university, not the student and the teacher. However, in the online environment the student's access is blocked.

The simplest way to address this is for the teacher to manually enroll the student in the class. This is essentially at the teacher's discretion, and takes just a few minutes. With small classes (fewer than 50 students) this not much of an issue. When classes exceed 1500 students the extra work for the teacher grows rapidly. Many teachers resist taking on this extra work arguing that they are there to teach, and not to administer. The scope for problems is compounded if the teacher is using ICT for distribution of course materials or assessment tasks. A student whose access is initially blocked, perhaps due to a misplaced enrolment form, might choose to appeal a poor result, generating extra work for all concerned.

New work for academic developers

I will describe one, so far unsuccessful, attempt by an academic developer, myself, to resolve this problem.

As part of my work I participate as a facilitator and steward in an online course area in which all staff of the university are enrolled, as students. This course area is used for a variety of purposes; modeling teaching practice, facilitating online discussion, illustrating tool use and features, collection and distribution of useful resources, and so on. Participation is voluntary (there is, after all, no assessment!) but strongly encouraged. On a semi-regular basis I post details online of some useful ideas and uses for ICT. One posting provided several ideas for using generic accounts. Generic accounts — ICT accounts made available for public use within a subject — can be used in a variety of ways. One of these is to get around the non-enrolled account problem just described. Generic accounts have been used for this and several other purposes on many occasions without any problems of which I am aware. If teachers were to take these suggestions up then they would have a readily introduced solution to problems such as the late enrolments described above.

Every institution has policies about appropriate student behaviors. At UTS, this policy requires individuals to be uniquely identified in the ICT system to prevent misuse of the system by outsiders, and to constrain authorized users to legitimate uses. This policy was set in place before the issue of generic accounts had emerged. Unfortunately for the teachers, a rigid interpretation of institutional policy, motivated by a legitimate and genuine concern for abiding by the rules, has now precluded the use of generic accounts, leaving the teachers in a situation where they are expected to take on the extra work to enroll the students manually. And the teachers, of course, continue resisting the extra administrative work. Several attempts to negotiate for the use of these accounts have failed. This represents an unresolved conflict in the priorities of the overlapping communities of practice involved.

Discussion

The notion of communities of practice articulated by Wenger (1998) captures beautifully some of the interactions between those within the university engaged in using or supporting ICT. I have mentioned just three groups here although there are others. Academic developers are often well placed to take on the role of facilitating the interactions between these groups. Their conventional work with teachers allows them to call on their broad knowledge and understanding of institutional contacts and policies. Academic developers working with ICT may have a background in IT, which enables them to participate in the discussion of technical issues affecting administrative policies relating to ICT.

In each of the cases depicted the individuals are responding to various pressures. In many cases, the accepted practices of individuals and the departmental and administrative structures within which they work have evolved in response to previous pressures. ICT is generating a new set of pressures and in many cases the old structures and practices may struggle to cope. The academic developers have an

important role to play by smoothing the waters, facilitating organisational changes and supporting two distinct groups of learners (the teachers and the IT department) with very different needs, perspectives and backgrounds.

Conclusion

The academic developer needs a complex set of skills and understandings if they are to carry out this role of facilitation across the various communities of practice within the university. This role seems to have sprung up unnoticed and consequently not much has been written about the challenges facing those who seek to facilitate the work of overlapping communities. Most importantly, they need to be aware of the differing priorities of each community. More understanding is needed:

- By teachers, of the central units supporting ICT;
- By students, of the complex organisational changes taking place in pursuit of improved student learning outcomes;
- By central units, of the situations faced by teachers and students;
- By academic developers, of the processes of organisational change.

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