Supporting an institutional blended learning mission through a structured change management programme

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The University of Hertfordshire was selected as one of nine Pathfinder pilot institutions to develop a new model for strategic change and staff development at a school level to support its institutional blended learning mission. This pilot was built upon 'Change Academy', a change management programme run by the Higher Education Academy. The pilot was a great success, resulting in more widespread development of blended learning within, and between, Schools and Faculties. The initial model was subsequently refined and has led to the creation of a programme which has now been extended for its fourth term at Hertfordshire and has influenced new models at a national and institutional level. This paper describes the background to the 'local' change management programme, its approach to meet the needs of managers and practitioners in supporting the enhancement of learning through the use of technology, and some outcomes from the programme.

Keywords: change, curriculum design, blended learning, sustainability, partnership

Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) is fully committed to Blended Learning (integrating e-learning and more traditional approaches to learning) and has a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the Blended Learning Unit (BLU), supporting and promoting this agenda (HEFCE 2005).

UH was selected to be one of the first universities to take part in the national Benchmarking and Pathfinder Pilot initiative managed by the HEFCE (Higher Education Academy and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England) (HEFCE 2005). Key findings from the Benchmarking Pilot demonstrated that the university has a sound e-learning infrastructure; a robust Managed Learning Environment, StudyNet, which is used by almost all staff and students; and there are good examples of strategically aligned policies and practices that facilitate the use of technology to enhance learning.

However the Benchmarking pilot also highlighted significant variability in the way Schools approach e-learning and the degree to which technology is used to enhance the student experience between, and within Schools. Key factors include the way in which the Institutional strategy is operationalised by different Schools; gaps in advanced skills (e.g. multimedia resource production, e-moderating skills and Blended Learning curriculum design); enthusiasm for e-learning amongst some staff and reluctance to adopt new practices by others.

Change through a pathfinder project

The UH Pathfinder project CABLE arose from lessons learned from the Benchmarking pilot, to address the issues of variability in the way learning technologies are used to enhance the student experience, the uptake of staff development opportunities and collaboration/synergistic working between Schools and central units such as the BLU. The CABLE project (Change Academy for Blended Learning Enhancement) draws on the change models and resources of the Change Academy methodology to construct a local model of change within Schools.

The CABLE project was developed to ensure that blended learning is embedded in strategic and sustainable ways within School plans, so as to achieve transformative changes in curriculum design. Changes in student needs and expectations are providing greater challenges for Schools, requiring more creative and flexible ways to support students effectively.

Adapting the change academy model

Change Academy is organised through a partnership between the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. It is a year-long programme of support for teams from higher education institutions that enables them to develop the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm for achieving complex institutional change. It provides unique opportunities for team-based learning and professional development that focus on the strategic interests and needs of the participating institutions. (Higher Education Academy, 2009).

CABLE utilised the most relevant aspects of Change Academy to develop a local version centred on a two day residential event, rather than four day, as some of the preparatory work was done within Team Leader and individual team meetings. The CABLE process adapted the Change Academy methodology to a local version in order to meet the needs of the relatively large number of personnel who would be involved from each School invited to take part. The University has 22 academic Schools supporting over 20,000 students and each School was invited to bid to become part of the CABLE process. From the applicants, six teams were selected to represent a range of Schools, disciplines and projects (Anderson & Bullen, 2009).

The CABLE process was developed to enable each team, together with BLU members and other relevant personnel to:

- Identify local imperatives for e-learning/Blended Learning development
- Review relevant policy, practice, infrastructure and staff skills sets
- Plan and implement necessary changes in strategic and sustainable ways (outcomes are reflected in each School's 3 year Strategic Business Plan)
- Identify pilot modules/programmes for early implementation
- Build in an evaluation mechanism pertinent to the changes implemented and informed by the Benchmarking Pilot

Achievements of the CABLE programme

The primary aim of this project was to enable participating Schools to embed transformative changes in e-learning/Blended Learning in strategic and sustainable ways. The secondary aim was to develop and champion a process that could be applied by some of the other Schools in future years, as participants in the process would be expected to share their expertise subsequently. Both of these have been achieved as well as the following:

Development of six School teams: Schools were required to outline their rationale for change and identify potential members for their team. The teams had to include a senior member of the School to ensure any major decision affecting the School could be effected. Across the six Schools that took part in the first phase, approximately 50 people were directly involved in the project and associated events, although there were significantly more involved in a less direct (but nevertheless important) capacity.

Student Engagement: UH has a firm commitment to student involvement and a student is a full time member of BLU, so CABLE teams were required to include a student as a full member of the team. Students appreciated being involved and were valued by the teams:

> We would be galloping along and our student would say "hang on a minute" and you think that is so sensible – it kept us realistic (Team Leader meeting)

Development of leadership and project management skills: These skills were identified as essential by three of the Team Leaders at project outset.

Review of curriculum design and formulation of an action plan: Teams undertook a thorough curriculum review facilitated by divergent thinking techniques and regular team activities and meetings. This was predominantly a positive experience but there were some anxieties in the initial stages of the project, mainly about time and challenges in formulating an action plan:

The department really needs to change, hopefully this will show us the way (First Team Leader meeting)

Dissemination: Teams actively engaged with this from the outset and plans for dissemination were required to be included in action plans. Teams identified subject specific conferences and publications, and workshops were held at the International Blended Learning conference and the annual Learning and Teaching conference. The Business School team hosted an event to share their innovations in curriculum design with Leeds Metropolitan University.

Inter-School collaboration and identification of synergies: Team Leaders established links across the six Schools for support and also for skills development and resource sharing.

The whole experience has been a positive one, generating a greater openness to new skills and new ways of thinking about change. It has also underlined the benefit of interfaculty communications as a way to stop "reinventing the wheel (Team Leader meeting)

Synergies with the Workforce Development Agenda: it became clear that there were common objectives in the need to develop capacity for flexibility in learning and teaching strategies, to be more responsive to the needs of employers and students, and to ensure that institutional systems were expeditious of, rather than barriers to, this process.

Partnerships with BLU: teams have worked well with BLU personnel and have a greater understanding of the role of the unit and the resources therein. BLU have established links with key people in the Schools and have deeper insight into the existing skills and interests of staff, as well as the learning technology skill development needs of staff which will inform BLU activities in years to come. The inclusion of Facilitators and BLU Teachers has been invaluable in establishing communication and support has been much appreciated by Team Leaders.

Definitely a good experience to have worked through and helped me to develop new ways of thinking for me and of working with colleagues I didn't know from my teaching (Team Leader meeting)

Examples of success at school level

In the Business School the challenge was to find new ways of engaging large cohorts of students with a high number of visiting lecturers and new staff. It became apparent that students were not always confident with information technology and required support. Staff had concerns that they had insufficient time and support to develop skills and they were concerned that there was an imbalance between teaching and computer expertise. Interestingly some staff identified themselves as "dinosaurs" although engagement with learning technologies increased throughout the project largely negating this self analysis. Referral rates were significant and there were differing approaches from staff. CABLE enabled the team to become change agents for a blended learning approach to the challenge, focussing on working with module leaders. The team developed training and support for new and visiting lecturers and a module checklist which was adopted across the School. In a follow-up project in CABLE 2.0 an induction package for new staff was developed to ensure they are supported and valued as they engage with blended learning as soon as their appointment begins. Outcomes of the project were very positive and the team reported early indications of better student outcomes in terms of grades and attendance.

In Aerospace, Automotive and Design Engineering (AADE) the team aimed to support campus based students by exploring the potential use of learning technologies in laboratories. This was driven by the need to manage increasing student:staff ratios and decreased contact time. By using technologies such as video, Camtasia® and SMIRK (http://smirk.herts.ac.uk/) it proved possible to capture laboratory activity thus enabling students to revisit material at their own pace rather than having a single opportunity in class time. Students proved very helpful in assisting staff to use external sites to host material as an interim measure. The team are also exploring the use of Second Life and remote access technologies to engage students with wind tunnel experiments.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The CABLE project is an academic led process, where academic staff have identified the challenges facing their disciplines and stakeholders, and have had direct control of and input into curriculum design changes. The CABLE Steering Group and the Core CABLE team have enabled changes by adopting an outreach strategy and subtle direction. The project plan allowed for reflexivity within teams and focused on having clear objectives and outcomes at each step. This project was learning and teaching led, intent on transformation within Schools and not just focused on technology. However the lessons learned from the curriculum design changes effected through CABLE and the experience of the BLU Teachers will ensure that learning technologies are used effectively to continue the enhancement of blended learning.

A key outcome has been the personal journey of many of the participants. Initially there was some anxiety about workloads and the ambitious timing of the project. Two of the teams were quite established (e.g. Nursing) but others hardly knew each other. These situations threw up real challenges: for established teams working differently, changes in group dynamics and anxieties about radical curriculum design changes. For newly formed teams the challenges were establishing relationships, identifying skills and interests and establishing a common goal. It is evident that staff are thinking differently and the initial enthusiasm for this project has been productive and sustained.

There were a number of clear recommendations around:

1. Project Management
   - Robust project planning and application of the CABLE process model is essential
   - Be prepared to finance initiatives and incentivise/reward participants
   - Establish a Steering Group and include external advisers/critical friends
   - Administrative support and technical support for resource development
   - Publish clear objectives and expected outcomes for each event/meeting/activity
   - Front loading of project start up time
   - Work towards dissemination from the outset

2. Team Development
   - A central project site that all team members can access is important
   - Timing: forward planning to allow staff time to plan commitments and "buy out" time
   - Allow time for new teams to gel and involve teams in planning events. Plan activities which are relevant to the project and that allow team members to get to know each other, and build in time to relax and have fun
   - Raise awareness of Facilitators/sources of support early in the process
   - Encourage divergent thinking time even when teams are pushing to move to solutions
   - Gain commitment to process from senior management in Schools and for them to allow Team Leaders to be as autonomous as possible.
   - Involve students closely throughout
   - Involve staff at all levels, not just a "top down" , research or "elitist" approach, this project was academic led with a "light touch" approach to project management
   - Encourage team members to talk to others and attend events in order to develop collaborative links and share ideas.

Sustainability of CABLE and future developments

A clear commitment to blended learning enhancement within each School was key to the sustainability of the CABLE process and this was achieved. It was clear that team members had an enthusiasm and commitment to sustaining the process and developed a sense of ownership of the project outputs. In addition the teams generated interest within their Schools, which make it more likely that they will be influential in changing practice. Now into its third year, sixteen teams from fourteen different Schools have already been through the CABLE process at UH, working in partnership with the Blended Learning Unit to review and develop blended learning provision. The UH model has been adopted by several institutions and the CABLE team have presented on their programme at a variety of local and national events.

The Change Academy model has been further refined by the Higher Education Academy and CABLE has influenced the development of Enhancement Academy, a new change management programme for 2009/10 specifically aimed at institutional approaches to enhancing learning through technology (Mayes, J.T et al, 2009). The Enhancement Academy programme is supporting year-long projects in nine

institutions across the UK, as they work to enhance learning and teaching at their institutions through the use of technology. They took part in a three-day residential, which included a blend of presentations, workshops and teamwork sessions, and where teams had an opportunity to focus on their projects, which range from the formation of a new university to using the best technology in a student induction programme. Each team has also benefited from the input of a "critical friend", an academic who is experienced in the institutional change process and can bring significant expertise to the project. The critical friend will work with their team to offer advice and, where appropriate, a frank and confidential critique. A hybrid model is now also being employed at a discipline level in partnership with the Academy's 24 Subject Centres.

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