MODELLING NEW SKILLS FOR ONLINE TEACHING

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Abstract

As well as the need to support 'traditional' staff development, there is also a need to model the new teaching strategies and skills required for teaching successfully in an online environment. This paper examines the theoretical background for the integration and modelling of online teaching within a staff development program.

Keywords

Staff development, online teaching, modelling

The need for new models of staff development

Staff development is widely recognised as being crucial in the successful introduction of technological innovations in teaching. However, even where this is accepted, development costs still have a tendency to usurp large portions of the funding. This falsely suggests that given the appropriate hardware and software, academics will quickly and easily change their teaching methods and course materials to take advantage of it. It is likely that many projects have failed to reach wide acceptance because adequate post adoption support was not provided (Hansen, Deshpande, & Murugesan, 1999; Surry & Farquhar, 1997). Apart from the 'early-adopters', many academics are understandably reluctant to move to technologically based teaching innovations which they perceive as complex, untried and lacking in support (Sawyers & Alexander, 1998).

After previous failed, often expensive, attempts to use technology in education some actively scorn new attempts to use technology at all. Those that assume they can easily transfer successful face-to-face teaching strategies and materials to an online environment may be similarly antagonistic in the future. Even with incentives and a willingness to change, teachers often retreat back to comfortable, more traditional teaching methods (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

In order to incorporate online skills into their own teaching, academics are likely to benefit by actively experiencing them as a learner (Wills, Nouwens, Dixon, & Lefoe, 1997). Teachers who have positive experiences with technology and have adequate support are more likely to integrate technology into their own teaching (Freeman, 1997). However, recent research has found that, for staff development activities in Australian universities related to online teaching and learning, 'traditional' methods of training are still clearly favoured over online methods (Ellis, O'Reilly, & Debreceny, 1998).

A common problem with traditional staff development activities is that they tend to attract the best teachers (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Some staff may be reluctant to attend as they feel it may demonstrate a lack of some kind. Many more probably fail to attend simply due to time pressures. Where staff do find time to attend it is often a

single event. The ability of simple 'one-shot' workshops to promote lasting change is often questioned (Fowler & Dickie, 1997).

Online material not only models good practice, but also provides the same advantages we readily recognise for our own students. For example, it allows staff to work at their own convenience, in private if they wish, and set their own pace. Apart from taking up significant amounts of time, workshops and seminars sometimes prove to have only fleeting relevance to the problem at hand. Online resources can be covered in a just-in-time fashion targeting the exact need.
Thus, as well as the need to support staff development, recognising the fears that staff may have, there is also a need to model the new teaching strategies and skills required for teaching successfully in an online environment.

Online teaching skills

Methods for teaching online include:

- Asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (eg. email, discussion groups)

- Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (eg.chats, desktop videoconferencing, groupware)

- Online Assessment

- Learning Resources

- Documents (eg. lecture notes, readings)

- Multimedia (interactive or otherwise)

- Links to external resources

- Student Prepared Material

Academics wanting to incorporate online teaching into their repertoire want to know - What are the skills and strategies required for successful online teaching? Unfortunately, no single set of skills can be isolated, as online teaching occurs in many different contexts. In addition, technology is evolving so rapidly that new teaching possibilities arise regularly. Use of online teaching ranges from simple supplements to more traditional methods, through to distance courses run entirely online. The level of teaching and technological expertise of academics varies enormously as does the range of software products that may be incorporated. Nevertheless, some common factors are highlighted in successful projects using online teaching in disparate contexts. These include structure, relevance and support.

Structure

A major theme in the literature is the need to provide a clear structure for activities (Cifuentes et al., 1997; Klemm, 1998; Mason & Bacsich, 1998). In the move towards constructivism, where the role of the teacher is changing from that of an expert authority to that of facilitator, there is sometimes a tendency to leave too much up to the individual student. This appears contradictory, as one of the major roles of a

facilitator of learning should be to provide an adequate framework for students to work within.

 "Students take a course to be guided and most learners, even highly motivated ones, need structures within which to pace their work, focus their study and concentrate their efforts" (Mason & Bacsich, 1998).

While providing structure is not unique to online teaching, there is a tendency for those new to online teaching to rely too heavily on the technology. For example, establishing a discussion group and simply letting students know they can put messages in, is not likely to work (Mason & Bacsich, 1998).

Methods to structure online activities include –

- Requiring a deliverable (eg. plans, designs, papers, portfolios etc)
- Limiting the scope of activities in terms of size and/or time
- Providing closure to activities
- Actively moderating discussions
- Conducting collaborative projects
- Interacting with guest speakers
- Debates & role plays
- Surveys & polls
- Formation of learning teams
- Brainstorming

In particular, there is a need to structure online discussion groups in order to gain maximum participation. Various strategies such as adjusting group size, allowing anonymity, encouraging lurking and including mandatory components can be employed. It is interesting to note that at the level of 'classroom' strategy there is often considerable disagreement. For example, some see value in allowing students to view the work of others and the feedback they receive (Freeman, 1997; Shneiderman et al., 1998), while others attempt to actively discourage lurking (Klemm, 1998).

It is possible to provide too much structure (Cifuentes et al., 1997) and a balance between teacher vs student control needs to be found. For example, while there are benefits from teachers actively participating in discussions (Klemm, 1998), many experienced online teachers also comment on the advantages of being prepared, at times, to hand control of moderation to students (Cifuentes et al., 1997; Mason & Bacsich, 1998; Witmer, 1998).

Relevance

Relevance is also an issue not confined to online teaching. However, while students accept traditional teaching strategies as 'natural' learning activities, they may question the value of unfamiliar strategies such as participating in computer conferencing (Cifuentes et al., 1997). It is an often untested assumption that, given the choice, students would volunteer to participate in online learning or feel that it helped them learn (Althaus, 1997). Indeed, it has been found that some students who are reluctant to participate in online conferences opt out because they feel it is 'not pertinent to their classroom learning' (Witmer, 1998).

Until online learning is more commonplace among schools and universities, there is a particular need to make online activities interesting and relevant to the life experiences, vested interests and ambitions of students (Klemm, 1998).

In addition, it is tempting to use online teaching for reasons other than the enhancement of learning. For example, some staff simply want to build up skills in online teaching, others may want to reach a wider (global?) audience. Students quickly recognise if an activity is an 'add-on' and may consequently give it less attention. We need to question placing an activity online if there is no pedagogical reason for doing so.

Many of the techniques used in online teaching, such as the ability to form collaborative teams that work effectively even when separated by distance, are likely to be increasingly found in the workplace. Students may not recognise this and it is worthwhile to emphasis this link to future employment practices (Cifuentes et al., 1997).

The extra workload involved in many online activities is not lost on students. While there does not have to be an absolute correlation, providing a demonstrable link between the weighting of assessment with the amount of work expected is often recommended (Cifuentes et al., 1997; Klemm, 1998; Mason & Bacsich, 1998).

Support

While staff development is usually accepted as essential to the success of online teaching (even if not funded accordingly) consideration of student training and support is often overlooked. The level of technical expertise of students may not be as high as expected (Shneiderman et al., 1998), particularly given that online teaching may first be provided by innovative academic staff who are comfortable experimenting with new technology. Students may be able to access email, but still 'have difficulty building mental models of the multi-layered electronic' learning environments (Witmer, 1998). Online teaching aims to facilitate learning. Without adequate support, students report that the technology actually detracts from learning the subject material (Shneiderman et al., 1998).
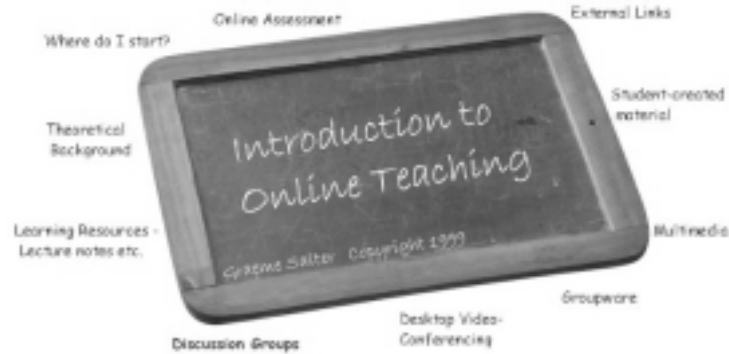
Where possible student support should be provided early in semester and include traditional methods such as face-to-face and printed materials as well as online support (Cifuentes et al., 1997). Certain activities, such as online assessment, are likely to compound student anxiety and it may prove useful to provide 'trial' online assessment items to allow students to become familiar with such methods.

While not strictly a teaching issue, technical support is also highly significant for both teachers and students. Many institutions are endeavouring to mainstream online teaching (Mason & Bacsich, 1998; Schneiderman et al., 1998; Wills et al., 1997). Widespread adoption depends on the involvement beyond those who would be considered innovators (Salter & Hansen, 1999; Sawyers & Alexander, 1998). While innovators are prepared to be relatively understanding of technical problems such as network outages, the bulk of users are not likely to be as forgiving and may quickly drop the use of technology (Surry & Farquhar, 1997).

Integration and modelling within a staff development program

PlatformWeb, a web-based teaching environment developed at UWS, Macarthur, is currently enjoying considerable success. At the time of writing, there were approximately 10,000 hits to the site by 2000 separate users over the course of a week. A large part of the success is due to using an adopter-based approach to the design. One of the key factors in this approach, modelled on Burkman's theory of user-oriented instructional development (Surry & Farquhar, 1997), is to provide significant post-adoption support.

Initial staff development concentrated on technical issues such as how to upload material and construct online quizzes. The current phase focuses more on pedagogical issues and how to enhance teaching and learning using the new environment. A website has been developed and made available to all staff who are registered users of PlatformWeb.

Online Assessment
External Links
Where do I start?
Theoretical Background
Student-created material
Introduction to Online Teaching
Graeme Salter Copyright 1999
Learning Resources - Lecture notes etc.
Multimedia
Groupware
Desktop Video-Conferencing
Discussion Groups

The common factors identified earlier in this paper are included within a broader theoretical background. In addition, for each online method currently available within PlatformWeb (eg. online assessment) there are sections on

- Benefits
- Problems
- Strategies
- Examples
- Issues
- References

As noted earlier, the classroom strategies presented are often contradictory, but all those identified from the literature are included. The aim of the site is for staff to 'dip into' areas of interest to the depth they require and to have a wide variety of strategies and examples to select from which may fit their own teaching context. An online forum has also been established to compliment the website and to further model online teaching.

The website and discussion group are only a part of the overall staff development program. As with students new to the medium, it makes little sense to restrict staff support to online methods. Teaching itself is an eclectic process and there is no need to adopt an all-or-none attitude (Schneiderman et al., 1998). While modelling online teaching may be beneficial, it is not a competition with 'traditional' methods. Indeed, the use of the term traditional must be made with care as it can mistakenly suggest 'some widely practiced method that presumably has predictable acceptable results' (Ehrmann, 1995). Future research will indicate the degree to which online teaching

can compliment other methods of staff development and identify if trends exist in the profiles of adopters.

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