

E-teaching professional development: Designing a sustainable program for multi-location teachers



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This poster informs the community of a project being undertaken at The University of Wollongong (UOW) to develop a program to support teachers involved in multi-location teaching. UOW has incorporated blended and distributed teaching throughout many Courses. These models rely heavily on educational technologies for delivery, as well as part time and sessional staff, for delivery. This project aims to address the needs of these staff. By examining barriers to utilisation, it will develop a professional development program that utilises flexible delivery strategies for delivery.

Keywords: staff development; professional development; eTeaching; multi-location; blended; distributed; Web 2.0; higher education

Background

Many higher education Institutions offer distributed and flexible models of learning. In order to sustain these models there is an increased reliance on part time and sessional staff in locations remote from the main campus, to provide teaching at the “coal-face”. Preliminary investigations at the University of Wollongong (UOW) have indicated that these staff rarely access centralised professional development that supports their role in distributed teaching.

This paper reports on a project aimed to develop a flexible professional development program tailored to needs of remote teaching staff; it is supported by the ASCILITE Mentoring Program. The primary purpose of the project is to design modules for a flexible staff development program that can support academics teaching in a distributed and blended program. The project is examining the needs of academics and tutors from the UOW Woolyunga Indigenous Centre and developing a prototype for a web based staff development program to suit their needs. The project also investigates the feasibility of web-based social collaboration tools (Web 2.0) for staff development. Once developed it is envisaged that this professional development model will provide the basis for the development of an e-teaching program that can be re-purposed and transferred to other similar teaching team environments.

UOW context

The University of Wollongong has embraced a multi location teaching model of delivery since 1999. Courses are currently offered through seven Campuses and Centres both within Australia and overseas. The success of these courses relies on the quality of the teaching. Casual and sessional staff play a vital role in this quality teaching. This distributed teaching is made possible through the utilisation of educational technologies such as video conferencing and streaming lectures as well as resources and communication delivered through the *Blackboard Vista* learning management system (LMS). Many of the subjects rely on sessional staff at the regional centres for student consultation, tutorials and marking. The University, recognising the important role of sessional staff, has been examining ways to support these remote staff.

E-teaching professional development

New teaching models that incorporate educational technologies present a number of challenges to academics. The movement into blended teaching at UOW has meant that staff must become competent

with new teaching technologies. Alongside this is the pedagogical movement from teacher-centred to student-centred learning.

The LMS plays a fundamental role in delivery of blended teaching. Whilst the software provides tools for assessment, activities, collaboration and discussion, many academics are under-utilising the potential of the tool. The most common use of the LMS is still the distribution of content including Power Point presentations and lecture notes.

The Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), a central unit within UOW supports teaching staff as they grapple with the issues presented by these new technologies. Staff development for e-teaching is offered through a range of services:

1. Phone support
2. Individual consultations
3. Web site
4. E-teaching 101- a support site within LMS
5. Workshops (general and faculty based)
6. Mini-conference- showcasing research and case studies of best practice in eTeaching
7. Faculty Service agreements

However, these professional development activities have limited impact on part time and sessional teaching staff within the distributed teaching centres. This project attempts to investigate the barriers and develop a flexible professional development program, which is tailored to the needs of these staff, therefore increasing both relevance and use.

Developing a new model for professional development

In 2006 CEDIR staff were involved in a Faculty Service Agreement with staff from the Woolyunga Indigenous Centre. The staff teach to a number of courses, one being the Bachelor of Arts offered to rural students by the faculty of Arts. The project involved the redevelopment of a core subject and the incorporation of blended teaching strategies. The subject under review was a core and offered through five centres, involving a large number of students. Delivery involved academics on campus as well as part time and sessional staff, located in the various centres. A professional development package was designed to support the teaching innovations. This project expands on the initial work undertaken.

Design methodology

The development of the project involves research, design, development and evaluation of the project. At the writing stage of this paper research involving focus groups with academic staff and initial design had been undertaken. By December 2007, it is envisaged that a detailed program identifying content areas and web design will be completed. One module targeting a topic will be developed, trialed and evaluated. At this stage the author hopes to incorporate Web 2.0 social collaboration software in the first module. The evaluation will involve a trial with academics and Learning Designers. Feedback will lead to refinement of the site, module and content. Once a successful proof of concept has been developed further modules will be produced. Upon management approval the whole program will then be incorporated into the University wide e-teaching professional development plan.

Preliminary investigations

Research was undertaken, as part of this project, utilising semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Initial discussions with teaching staff have revealed that many in the teaching team rarely participate in the formal professional development programs offered centrally at the University. These informal discussions have identified that heavy workloads and lack of time reduces their ability to access the programs. Many academics indicated that they prefer just-in-time support that addresses their specific needs. The results of this research have informed the development of the professional development program.

Elements of the model

Whilst in its early stages of development, it is envisaged that the project will facilitate the development of a modularised professional development program which will be offered flexibly for staff at UOW. The

program builds on previous work undertaken through at UOW by Percy and Beaumont (2007) and Lefoe & Meyers (2006). Percy & Beaumont (2007), have examined the needs of part time and sessional teaching staff and found that sustainability of a program is enhanced by the development of communities of practice, teams of people supporting one another in knowledge and skill development. These findings are supported by the work of Maor & McLoughlin (2005), which identified communities of practice as an important element in effective staff development programs. In 2006 Lefoe & Meyers (2006) explored the use of Web 2.0 social collaboration software (blog and wiki) to support professional development programs they identified that the communication and collaboration functionality offered many possibilities.

This previous work combined with the informal discussions indicate the need to incorporate a number of elements into the program in order to enhance enrolment and sustainability:

1. Flexibility
2. Modularised units of study
3. Combination of self directed/paced and collaborative elements
4. Utilise online tools
5. Reduction of isolation
6. Relevance to immediate work
7. Task based learning (adapted from Salter & Richards, 2005).

The project will form part of the professional development programs at the University of Wollongong. It will develop and trial a sustainable model of professional development and supports the needs of sessional and part time staff. It will most importantly offer a model that can be adapted and re-purposed for the design of the flexible e-teaching professional development programs.

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