

Reflections on staff development in eLearning via a community of practice model

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This narrative seeks to identify practices which have enabled staff in eLearning roles to support their peers to increase the use of eLearning within a New Zealand tertiary education context. Specifically, it examines those factors which have contributed to the development of institutional capability in eLearning over a two-year funded period. Unitec New Zealand has recently implemented a transformative eLearning Development Strategy with the aim of developing the capability and capacity of Unitec academic staff in integrating learning technologies. The funding of a number of temporary roles aided development of staff capability and capacity in eLearning through a Community of Practice model. We consider factors that contribute to the development of a sustainable learning culture, and identify how a community approach has enabled this. We further explore and reflect upon the enablers and barriers experienced in the eLearning roles, and the implications of using this model and its efficacy in meeting institutional goals. An extended version of this paper was presented at the Moodle Research Conference held in Heraklion, Crete on 14-15 September 2012.

Keywords: eLearning, capacity building, staff development, Community of Practice, tertiary, New Zealand

Background

Unitec provides vocational and applied professional education from Certificate to Doctoral level at its four Auckland campuses, with mostly face to face courses, however there is an increasing demand for more flexible delivery of courses. Oram's (2009) Auckland 2060 report forecasts a climate of change requiring teaching practice to be reconsidered to reflect the societal demands of the future. In 2010 Unitec began implementation of a transformative initiative described as the Living Curriculum. This entails a number of key principles including complex conversations, curiosity, focus on practice, social constructivism, blended learning experiences, research-informed, interdisciplinary, literacies for lifelong learning and embedded assessment. Underlying this, an additional 'eLearning Development Strategy' was launched with the aim of developing the capability and capacity of Unitec academic staff in integrating learning technologies to enhance the learning experience offered to Unitec students. It was recognised that in order to fully integrate eLearning into the Living Curricula, institutional capability had to be developed and support structures provided to facilitate development activities. As a vehicle for realising these objectives, the Community of Practice (CoP) model was selected as a potentially empowering approach to building social capital.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (2006) defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". The Community of Practice model was selected with the aim to facilitate staff capacity building partly because it presented the opportunity for the practitioner to adopt the role of both expert and learner within the Community. This is of particular significance given the nature of the Living Curricula, and in questioning the traditional role and identity of academic staff as

experts rather than life-long learners and collaborative constructors within the domain (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011). This approach is also more fitting with ‘Ako’, the Māori concept of teaching and learning as a reciprocal, connected and interrelated process “where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators’ practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. Ako recognises that the learner and whānau [family community] cannot be separated”. (Ka Hikitia, 2008, p.20)

Additionally, the Community of Practice model is one which is said to offer a “demanding and productive perspective” (Wenger, 2009) from which to view the relationship between community and technology. In understanding how technologies can influence, challenge, foster and be adapted by communities, participants are afforded the opportunity also to experience and reflect on the implications of eLearning as framed within the Living Curriculum.

Funded Roles to support eLearning Strategy rollout

Unitec leadership recognised that the implementation of the eLearning Strategy, Living Curricula and transition from Blackboard to Moodle, would present staff with some confronting change. It was acknowledged that staff would need time and support to enable an optimal response to the new demands being posed. The success of the eLearning Strategy therefore was dependent on strong support within departments and central support teams, to ensure staff had adequate scaffolding for the change process. “Teacher’s capacity for change is frequently compromised by issues of workload, and a significant ongoing challenge was enabling processes whereby workloads could be managed effectively to allow the time and space for conversation and reflection.” (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011 p. 50).

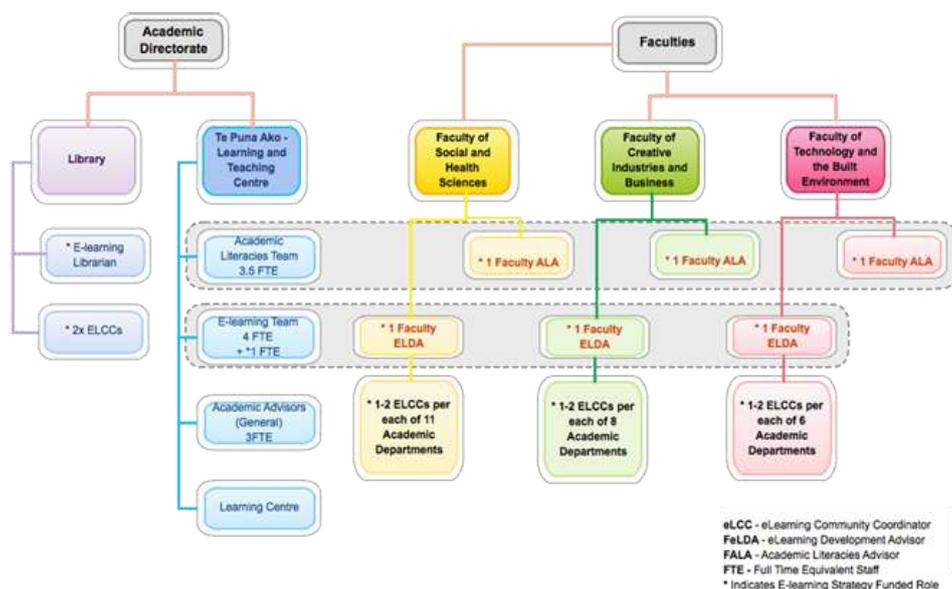


Figure 1: Roles supporting staff development in eLearning during the eLearning Strategy Implementation

Unitec leadership recognised the key value of providing well-resourced support services in enabling the pedagogical shift and technical skills acquisition required to successfully implement the eLearning Strategy, as “support allows those engaged in the difficult process of implementation to tolerate the anxiety of occasional failures” (Guskey, 2002, p. 388). Provision of support under the eLearning Strategy involved both centralised and faculty-based resourcing. The eLearning Strategy was driven through Te Puna Ako, the learning and teaching development centre. The Centre provided dedicated expert support for staff in eLearning (including technical support in partnership with IT services), general academic support, and support in the integration of literacies. The Te Puna Ako Learning Centre provided academic support to students. A number of additional,

temporary roles were funded to support and foster increased staff capability and capacity in eLearning and associated academic and information literacies. A supplementary eLearning team member was employed in Te Puna Ako for the duration of the eLearning Strategy roll-out. Additionally, one full time eLearning Librarian role, three full time Faculty eLearning Development Advisors (FeLDAs) and three Faculty Academic Literacy Advisors (FALAs) were recruited to complement the department-based eLearning Community Coordinators (eLCCs) and to work closely with Te Puna Ako.

These additional roles were initially deployed for 18 months. The department-based eLearning Community Coordinator (eLCC) roles were a part-time appointment filled by existing Unitec teaching staff, who were each given (up to 0.2) time release to provide staff development opportunities within their department.

“The CoP model has been a key vehicle for facilitating collaboration within and across departments, as has the funding of specific ‘technology stewards’ (eLCCs) within the departments. These eLCCs are vital shaping voices in helping keep the focus and purpose of eLearning developments on core pedagogic issues.” Keesing-Styles and Ayres (2011)

The FeLDA’s and FALA’s assisted in liaising with and supporting the various departments in Unitec, and supporting the Communities of Practice. The initiatives driven by the Library impacted on institution-wide adoption of eLearning, assisting in embedding information literacy through technology, building capacity, and providing access to resources and equipment.

Community of Practice Implementation

In 2010 official implementation of the CoP approach was launched with a five day workshop facilitated by Etienne Wenger & Beverly Trayner. The workshop set the stage for the eLearning community in establishing an identity, defining roles and initiating the eLearning Strategy at Unitec.

“The first organised event most of the eLCCs attended was the week-long Community of Practice workshop with Etienne Wenger and Bev Trayner. I cannot emphasise enough how important and meaningful this event was for me. Wenger and Trayner provided the eLCC group with an important introduction into community of practice theory and practice, and eLCCs spent the week conversing, bonding and learning. We entered as individuals and exited as a community. As far as I’m concerned, the organisation of that workshop was a stroke of genius.” (eLCC quoted in Benseman, 2011, p. 8)

The eLCCs had regular informal and formal events together, workshops, regular mini symposiums where they shared what they were doing, shared knowledge, and talked together about the challenges they were facing. These opportunities were utilised more by the active eLCCs and those who had time available. Some eLCCs also ran a similar CoP within their department, but tailored to their departmental needs. The eLearning team modelled the role of “technology stewards” (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009), encouraging interdepartmental interactions and sharing of best practice. This coaching from the eLearning team assisted eLCCs to support their CoP’s as they were established and shaped to meet each department’s needs. The use of Moodle Docs, Moodle tracker, and forums supplemented the internal support. Participants of the eLearning CoP also contributed in wider Moodle community activities.

Identified Issues

A mid-point survey and end point interviews of eLCCs were conducted in the eLearning Strategy implementation period. Several themes emerged from this data, which are useful in informing an evaluation of the efficacy of the approach taken, and in reflecting on those factors which had impacted on the eLCCs ability to foster staff development. Evidence is also drawn from the Strategy evaluation and evaluation moderation documentation.

Time and Workload

Time and workload were highlighted as the most significant barriers to participation in the eLCC community, and in fostering community and staff development within the Departments. "Many staff are keen to learn more and get involved - but the opportunity to do so is limited by staff and eLCC's time, free meeting "slots" and similar resourcing issues" (eLCC).

Allocated time to participate in Community activities was seen as a crucial enabler. "Having an official role and time release within my department allowed me to greatly expand the eLearning support I had previously been unofficially providing to staff in my department. It enabled me to have individual discussions with each of my colleagues and provide them customised support to achieve their eLearning goals." (eLCC)

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy levels of staff impacted on the uptake of eLearning technologies and their ability to recognise the pedagogical affordances of these technologies. There were many staff requesting Moodle basic tools workshops who were simply not ready to discuss Living Curriculum characteristics or the eLearning Strategy as they did not feel confident using online technologies. The Natural Sciences department found the collaborative design and use of a Moodle course template alleviated some of the barriers related to literacy issues for their staff.

Support

Midpoint and endpoint feedback accorded with the Unitec leadership's acknowledgement that support systems would be crucial to the implementation of the eLearning Strategy. From the eLCC perspective particularly, the value of local (within Departments) and central support services, and conversely, the detrimental impact of a lack of support were perceived as crucial determiners in enabling both community and staff development to flourish.

Central Support

The integral role Te Puna Ako played in staff development was frequently recognised, both for the provision of practical training and advice, and for the interpersonal support and connections. The support activities offered by Te Puna Ako were highly valued, with one on one training and mentoring rated by eLCCs as the most useful support received. The value of face-to-face communication with Te Puna Ako was also highlighted. "TPA staff are our hub to go to. It is excellent to be able to drop in anytime and have face to face contact" (eLCC). eLCCs ranked the Te Puna Ako mini symposiums in particular as being 'highly useful' in supporting the eLCC role. "I learnt a lot, met so many people, very friendly and approachable lot at TPA, exchange of experiences, friendly atmosphere, love the homemade cakes" (eLCC). Activities facilitated through the central support teams provided important opportunities for sharing knowledge and keeping momentum.

"The eLearning communities' mini symposiums were great as you got to see how web 2.0 tools could be utilised in teaching in a way that I could understand and hear staff talking about successes they were having, so I could then see scope for being innovative and creative in teaching, and TPA provided a great space for that to happen with an inclusive open flow through feeling about it". (eLCC)

Many of the eLCCs requested more opportunities to share best practice in the existing format of TPA sponsored mini symposiums, though equally there was a desire for tools based workshops, highlighting the need to consider digital literacy levels for these key staff. "I have found that when I need to do a specific thing in eLearning that specific consultation is very helpful." (eLCC)

Local Support

It was concerning that one quarter of the eLCCs felt they received 'little or no support' from within their department. The majority met with their Head of Department monthly or less and were more likely to met with Te Puna Ako staff. One eLCC wrote that "without active support and championing within a Department's management and leadership structure it is difficult to get traction."

Strong local support greatly enhances the chances of successful staff development. In the Department of Languages there was strong leadership support, evident in the provision of additional, department funded e-learning leadership roles to support the work of the eLCCs. This department had very active eLCCs who took were proactive in enhancing their own capability and sharing their learning and experiences, in the Department CoP and National Moodle Moot for example. There was recognition of successes within the department and ongoing dissemination of the learned expertise across the department. Many staff development activities were initiated in this department, including well patronised forum conversations, 'social' eLearning events and a variety of workshops. This department integrated a number of additional web 2.0 technologies and worked with the eLearning team to identify discipline specific Moodle modules and plugins that supported their students to meet learning outcomes.

Role Ambiguity

A lack of clarity of the eLearning roles may have impacted on their efficacy and on the way in which the roles were received and perceived by other staff. This ambiguity appears to have resulted in part from the tension between the organic and dynamic nature of roles within a CoP, and the management and peer expectations of a paid role in achieving specific outcomes in a given timeframe. Roles within a Community of Practice are by necessity fluid, allowing for participants to in turn offer their unique perspectives, experiences and expertise. Scope exists within the CoP model to appreciate the unique contributions made by different practitioners within the domain. The expected outputs required of the eLCCs, FeLDAs and eLearning staff under the Strategy however, may have been at odds with their roles as CoP participants and stewards.

Reflections on Community

The actualisation of a true Community of Practice may not have been realised in the eLearning implementation period. However, a community approach to adapting to the LMS migration and eLearning Strategy was certainly a defining characteristic of the process, and a catalyst for 'shift' in pedagogy, and staff development initiatives. "Sharing practice is more useful than sharing/ discussing academic position" (eLCC). While feedback on the efficacy of the Community of Practice model was mixed, there is evidence that the approach taken by Unitec had very positive outcomes in empowering staff initiatives, and providing the basis for a collaborative approach to staff development. One eLCC said:

“My involvement in the Unitec eLearning Community of Practice was hugely beneficial to me, impacting my role both within my own department and across the institution as a whole.... Being part of a wider community exposed me to a range of other Unitec staff with an interest in eLearning. I was able to share my ideas with others from different disciplines and to adopt ideas used elsewhere to good effect. I have certainly learned a lot from the experience and continue to benefit from a number of ongoing professional relationships formed through this community.” (eLCC)

Over the Strategy period, there was a visible shift in focus from Moodle tools to discussions around pedagogy. This was evidenced in eLCCs presentations at community workshops and mini symposiums for example. The scope of interest broadened to the integration of other tools with the Moodle platform as staff, delved into eportfolios, use of twitter for collaboration and introducing RSS feeds to encourage currency within the discipline in Moodle learning spaces for example. The exploration of iPads as a teaching and learning tool grew as did educational gaming and digital storytelling. There were more Web 2.0 technologies integrated with Moodle and more complex use of core Moodle tools and investigations into their application to learning. This experimentation improved the support the eLCCs could offer staff across all levels of digital literacy. The Community approach as a vehicle for staff development, and a means of facing institutional change enabled participants to own part of the vision of the eLearning Strategy, and development of eLearning use in the institution, as well as providing a forum for challenging some of the Strategy's goals. Recognition needs to be awarded to the departments who have - with the support of their eLCCs and FeLDAs - developed successful communities where sharing of best practice and continuing focus on staff development was becoming a norm.

Learning institutes considering a community of practice approach to staff development would benefit from adapting the model to meet specific institutional goals and the pedagogical changes sought. The selection process for new eLCCs requires careful consideration to achieve the best outcomes. There is the potential to exploit the early adopters' willingness to understand and apply eLearning in their teaching practice. These devoted individuals often step forward and act in this capacity for their peers regardless of time release, and as such, time release is an appropriate recognition of their contributions and addresses the workload inequalities this can raise. Existing peer-relationships allow eLCCs opportunities to model and disseminate best practice among their teaching team, in an informal and non-threatening manner, but the importance of dedicated support from management in optimising the impact afforded by these opportunities should be recognised. While the roles of the community participants require flexibility to be responsive to their community's needs, clear guidelines and shared understandings of the role between eLCC, peers and managers will reduce role ambiguity, and improve outcomes.

Where to from here?

The Faculty eLearning Development Advisor positions have been extended to maintain momentum in embedding eLearning into teaching practice. A number of Departments have self-funded time release for key staff to continue developing their peers. Additional departmental positions have been created out of a deeper understanding of the value in supporting staff to embrace eLearning. Since the conclusion of the initial eLearning Strategy implementation phase, tailored communities of practice have been emerging in response to staff interests and skills, knowledge and experiences acquired over the past two years. These communities are evidence of an institutional shift in approaches to staff development, and have empowered teaching staff to initiate their own fora for exploring interest topics. It appears that true Communities of Practice are now developing in the wake of the eLearning Strategy, and that the emergence of these communities has been facilitated by the opportunities afforded by funded time release for staff development and community participation.

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Please cite as: Roder, T., Rata-Skudder, N. (2012) Reflections on staff development in eLearning via the community of practice model. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), *Future challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012.* (pp.792-798).

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