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EVOLUTION OF A STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN PROMOTING QUALITY ONLINE TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper describes a case study analysis of the evolution of an academic professional development program, related to the use of WebCT in teaching programs. It also discusses the changing nature of the staff developer role. The training program begins with face-to-face workshops, covering pedagogical issues as well as technical and practical aspects of the software. The workshop series has matured in its format and content in response to staff requirements and demands, as well as software upgrades. This paper describes the ongoing evolution of the workshop program, and discusses the changes the staff developer role has undergone, in relation to operational initiatives and contributions to organisational policy development.

Keywords
WebCT, professional development

Introduction

During 2001-2002, Monash University implemented a program to adopt WebCT as its centrally supported Learning Management System (LMS). As with other universities, the dilemma for university staff is that while these LMS environments provide a simple interface for incorporating a range of web-based communication, content and assessment tools, they may also allow and even encourage practices that are not considered high quality teaching in higher education (see Chickering & Gamson, 1991). The challenge is to encourage quality teaching practices within the LMS through training that seamlessly incorporates both technical skills and pedagogy (Ellis & Phelps, 2000), and does not promote transfer of existing poor teaching practices to the online environment (Bates, 2000). Academic staff who may have poor computer and information literacy skills as well as few of the information management skills needed to effectively use a LMS to support their teaching, must not only learn how to operate within these environments but develop an informed critical perspective of their use of the LMS in teaching in a variety of modes (Fox & Herrmann, 2000). For some staff, this is a frightening prospect, (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998), and one which they may need friendly and personal encouragement to surmount.

The first part of this paper describes the integrated professional development program that has been evolving at Monash University for training staff in the use of WebCT. The program has been developed in a central unit responsible for institution-wide support of best-practice teaching, and aims to provide training to significant numbers of staff in the hands-on use of the LMS. The program is embedded in discussions about the teaching and learning issues that staff ought to consider when teaching online.

The second part of the paper discusses key issues in promoting best practice in online teaching and learning, and illustrates by example some approaches to staff development in several of these key areas.

An integrated approach to professional development

During 2001, an integrated staff development program was designed, with input from a wide range of stakeholders across the university community (Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002). The key objective of the training program was to adopt diverse approaches to academic development, ranging from generic workshops catering to large numbers to staff, to mentor networks operating within faculties and/or schools. No one type of activity was seen as sufficient in itself to meet all of our objectives. Any training program had to incorporate a variety of activities that ultimately encouraged learning about WebCT *in situ* with colleagues who wished to improve their teaching through the use of online information and communication tools (Boud, 1999).

Components of training program

A summary of the different components of each of the staff development program's strategies, with examples, is illustrated in Table 1.

Generic workshop program	Sequential series of 4 workshops, each building on the previous content: • Using WebCT as a student • Design principles, Communication & Collaboration tools • Adding content to WebCT • Online assessment activities
Customised training	Training programs designed to suit local or specific demands, conducted when and where required, for example: • Helpdesk staff • Library staff • Conducted at specific locations (e.g. Parkville, Malaysia)
Online resources (produced by a third party)	A set of accessible, easy-to-read manuals, • Catering for both staff & student level access • Available in both Word and pdf formats
Faculty or School support groups	Training staff working with groups in Faculties or Schools at a range of different levels, including: • Faculty committees • Local WebCT support groups • Curriculum development teams • Template development teams
On-call support	Provided until role of CeLTS helpdesk formalized.

Table 1: Structure of elements of the program

The aim was to provide staff with the flexibility to learn about WebCT in ways that better suited them and their circumstances. Some staff were content to use the online materials, sometimes accompanied by on-call support without attending workshops. However, other staff enjoyed interaction with training staff and their peers, and were appreciative of the human contact and flexibility of support provided during and after the workshops.

Implementation

As with most academic development programs, workshops were originally scheduled for non-teaching periods to optimise the chances of academics being able to find a time and venue convenient to their own requirements. The first series of workshops was conducted over the summer of 2001/2002, and further series have been conducted over each break in the teaching term. In response to high waiting lists for training, regular weekly workshops have also been conducted during semester 1 in both 2002 and 2003. All campuses of Monash University have been included in the face-to-face workshop program, including Monash Malaysia and Monash South Africa. For all Australian campuses, two members of the training team attend each workshop, with one person presenting the workshop and another available for one-on-one assistance for any workshop participant who falls behind or to deal with any technical issues that may

arise.

For the first workshop in the program (Table 1), staff were encouraged to participate as students in a previously developed WebCT unit. To accomplish this, staff were provided with a generic WebCT account and were required to interact as a student within the same unit. For subsequent workshops, each participant was issued with a WebCT course for which they were the designer, but they were also enrolled as students in other participants' WebCT courses. This organization of WebCT accounts allowed staff to work on tasks in small groups, where they could view and interact each other's work. The organisation of the WebCT courses impacted on what and how participants learned within the workshops.

Printed resource materials incorporating consideration of teaching and learning issues with local examples are being developed to complement the workshops, and some of the material contained in these has been integrated into the online WebCT courses that are used in the workshops. The first two of these have been distributed in workshops since the start of 2003, and further materials are in the final stages of editing.

In addition to the standard workshop program, customised workshops were provided to specific groups of both academic and general staff across the university. These groups included special interest groups, for example, library and helpdesk staff, who did not require training in design features of WebCT, but required in-depth knowledge of issues students may face when using WebCT. Nearly half of the training provided during 2002 was under the category of customised workshops.

Since the commencement of the Monash University WebCT training program in November 2001, a total of 857 staff have participated in workshops to date. Of those, 585 have attended the standard introductory WebCT workshops and 272 have attended faculty and/or branch based customised workshops. Details of the evaluation of the generic training workshops over 2001-2002 have already been presented (Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002).

Evaluation has been continuing throughout 2003, and has involved collection of online anonymous surveys from participants in all workshops conducted (145 participants from January through June 2003). Analysis of these survey responses has revealed that participants are generally happy with the structure and format of the workshops. Overall satisfaction ratings are 1.73 for Workshop 1 (n= 68) and 1.70 (n= 88) for the subsequent workshops (on a scale of 1= Extremely satisfied, 5 = Extremely dissatisfied). The hands-on format is very popular, as is the presence of two instructors in the room. Comments about the pace of the workshop included equal numbers concerned about the pace being too fast or too slow, but by far most respondents were satisfied with the pace. Most participants thought they gained a good overall understanding of what WebCT was, and a good knowledge of the range of functions and tools available for teaching. Many respondents commented on the enthusiasm and knowledge of the presenters, and enjoyed the discussions on issues of online teaching that arose during the workshops, and the chance to ask questions and receive immediate answers. The only concerns raised related to timing of the workshops (some workshops were scheduled during exam-marking periods), and concerns about ongoing support once staff commenced their online teaching.

Beyond the generic training workshops, a number of faculty or school based WebCT networks have been or are being established, where a WebCT training team member acts as a committee member or as a mentor to a small group of staff engaged in a specific teaching development project. Whilst some of these networks are faculty level committees, guiding the use of WebCT within the faculty, others are more project-based. Still others are organised through support centres within the faculty or department, or through the need to provide a centralised support service for WebCT. Monash University is a large complex bureaucracy where faculties enjoy considerable autonomy. In such a setting, it is important to note that these networks form in many different ways for many different purposes. An effective staff development program from a central group should establish links with these networks. The central group responsible for the program discussed here contributes to such networks in a variety of ways, for example
- Training
- Assisting with template development
- Contextualising the use of WebCT in specific teaching situations

In addition, a separate WebCT Help Desk was established within CeLTS, primarily for student use but this support has now been extended to staff. The help desk staff not only needed initial training in WebCT but ongoing assistance in order to provide support for staff who require extended help, or who may be pushing the boundaries of the capabilities of WebCT. Members of the training team also collaborated with help desk staff to prepare manuals, including common questions and problems experienced by staff at Monash.

Further developments in the staff development program

Advanced WebCT workshops

In direct response to feedback from staff, both via the workshop evaluation surveys and from Faculty and Departmental groups, the training team has prepared two further workshops, designed for staff who have completed the existing series of four workshops and who have gained some familiarity with using WebCT.

A summary of the coverage of these workshops is included in Table 2 below. The intention was to take a problem-solving approach in these workshops, encouraging staff to come along with problems they may have encountered, or to bring their own materials where appropriate. The workshops are designed to include embedded discussions about pedagogical issues raised in online teaching and learning, beyond merely the technical expertise required to use WebCT.

Descriptions of these proposed workshops were distributed to interested parties, both within Faculties and central organisations, and feedback was incorporated into the subsequent design. Faculty representatives were invited to a 'dress rehearsal' of the workshops once development was completed. This enabled us elicit feedback from key stakeholders, and to provide a practise run for the training staff with an experienced audience.

Development of the 'Managing your WebCT class' workshop has been described in further detail in another paper (Weaver & Kish, submitted)

Workshop title	Areas of coverage	Structure of workshop

Managing your WebCT class (Workshop 5)	• Tracking student progress
	• Accessing student submissions
	• Managing tutors
	• Managing student table
	   o creating columns of different types
	   o uploading & downloading student data
		A WebCT unit has been prepared with student submissions (discussion messages, submitted assignments, completed quizzes). Staff have access to a copy of this unit, and work through accessing student submissions, judging progress of individuals, manipulating the table of student results etc.

Advanced content management (Workshop 6)	• Adding files of different types (both web-friendly and non web-friendly) • Linking to files from different areas within WebCT • Linking to files delivered via CD-ROM • File management strategies	Staff are supplied with a CD-ROM of resources, and work through adding examples to different areas in a supplied WebCT unit.

Table 2: Content of Workshops 5 & 6

These workshops were conducted for the first time during the mid-year break in 2003, and have been very well received. Workshop 5 has been very popular with academics who have already been teaching with WebCT, as they have discovered various strategies for more efficient management of student results, and developed methods of tracking student progress through the different online activities. Discussion during

the workshops has been useful, as staff from different disciplines share their experiences and encourage each other with innovative ideas.

Workshop 6 is designed for staff who are interested in using more complex electronic resources in the WebCT environment. One of the most interesting aspects of this workshop has been the way in which the complex technical problems that were confronted during presentation served to extend the learning experience of participants through dynamic problem solving! Problems include the lack of common plug-ins (Flash, QuickTime) for viewing multimedia files, versions of Netscape which do not support WebCT, old versions of PowerPoint which did not allow saving files as web pages etc.

This workshop has always been conducted in a student computer laboratory, where the training team has little input into the operating environment of the computers. Despite the existence of a Monash University policy setting out the basic Standard Operating Environment to be maintained on all computers in Monash, it has been our experience that this has rarely been adhered to, especially where computer laboratories are under the control of Faculties or Departments. However, we have also found that many of our students' private computers do not have basic software installed, despite the free provision of a CD-ROM, available to all students, which provides all the required software and plug-ins. So one of our first lessons in this workshop is to be cautious about the file types we use, to keep the number of different file types to a minimum, and to provide alternate means, via links etc, for students to download any required software.

Despite these difficulties, this workshop has proved highly successful, and staff have enjoyed discovering how to link to WebCT tools and different files from within each other, and to truly begin to integrate their online activities for their students.

Staff development for quality improvement: What seems to work and why

Monash University's key strategic directions are outlined in the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan (http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/dvcap/ltpoverview.doc). Monash has made a strong commitment to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to achieve identified strategic outcomes, improve the undergraduate and postgraduate experience of learning and extend its market, and this is in line with current trends in higher education in Australia and globally (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

The staff development program discussed here, as part of an earlier WebCT Implementation Project, has complemented a suite of diverse activities across the University intended to provide academic staff with appropriate resources and opportunities to engage with online pedagogies, as Monash attempts to integrate human and other resources with the strategic use of ICTs in academic programs.

Our experience raises important questions about staff development to improve the quality of online learning. These are questions related to:
1. The contribution of academic professional development to organizational change.
2. Collaborative practice and team-based action learning as best practice in online pedagogy
3. Developing rational resource allocation for strategic 'just-in-time' training
4. The importance of researching practice to feed back into future practice and policy development.

In this section of the paper, I will draw on exemplars of our current practice to illustrate how we are building collaborative relationships with faculty colleagues to address several of these issues. Firstly, action learning as a strategy for staff development, and secondly the way we believe our involvement in faculty committee work contributes to organisational change.

Creating sustainable change and quality improvement in online learning
Encouraging staff to work collaboratively as a pedagogical strategy is consistent with current views about academic work and particularly important in the context of staff development and educational technologies (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Kandlbinder, 2000; Spratt, Palmer & Coldwell, 2000). One challenge inherent in this objective is to overcome the perception of

intellectual academic activity as centred on and controlled by the individual, which potentially limits opportunities for effective collaboration (Ellis & Phelps, 2000). There is a profuse literature that explores the place of action learning as a form of academic development and quality improvement (see Kember 2001 for a recent review in the context of educational technology).

In the context of our program, project-based action learning opportunities have expanded. These are highly valued by staff as a means to improve their teaching, their students' learning and their knowledge about online learning. A brief case in the field of Sonography is outlined to illustrate this approach. This subject is offered only in distance learning mode to off-campus students, studying part-time over two years. These mature-age students are normally all working in the field of medical diagnostic imaging or radiography, most have not participated in formal education for many years, and most have little or no experience with learning online or by distance education. The author and the academic in charge of the unit worked closely together, in a one-on-one mentoring arrangement, to develop effective strategies for supporting these students in their online learning (Wells, Weaver & Coombs, 2003). Staff development approaches included discussions about assisting students in starting their online work, advice on tracking student progress, feedback on approaches to moderating online discussion topics, and conducting mid-semester and end-semester evaluation surveys with the students.

This approach has been highly successful in assisting the academic staff member to reflect on his online teaching strategies and to re-visit the development of his online materials, and has achieved the initial objectives in developing a more flexible and student-centred subject. The academic staff member has found the process rewarding, albeit challenging, and has reported that, after an initial investment in training, the move to the LMS has made more efficient use of his time, and allowed him to spend more time nurturing his students in the online environment. At the same time, the project has been highly rewarding to the staff developer.

However, such a labour-intensive approach is not sustainable across all Faculties and campuses of an institution the size of Monash, for a professional development team of only three members. Accordingly, members of the training team have taken on professional development initiatives at organizational level in attempts to contribute to ongoing change and to encourage innovative practice.

The contribution of academic professional development to organizational change.

Ideally, the introduction of new educational technologies and strategies in teaching should involve academic discipline areas re-visiting their pedagogical models and practices, informed by contemporary literature. To support this process, members of the training team have initiated liaisons with the numerous Faculty and Department-based committees and groups operating across the campuses. Members of the team are active members on many of these committees, allowing us to use our experience to contribute to policy decisions and to support curriculum initiatives in line with the University's strategic directions. The author is an active member of the Electronic Learning Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences. The committee is responsible for "overseeing Electronic Learning activities within the Schools and Departments of the Faculty, with a particular focus on the resourcing of WebCT use within the Faculty" (http://webct.med.monash.edu.au/elcomm.html). Participation in this committee has involved, amongst others, advice on Faculty-wide templates for encouraging quality of teaching and consistency in the look of online units, assessing applications for local development grants, overseeing projects of electronic resources developed by students, assistance with evaluation of online units, and participation in local mentoring groups. An important benefit of participation in such committees is the opportunity for relationship-building and collegiality with faculty members.

Discussion

The WebCT staff development program was designed to target the "average" academic with low levels of IT skills, and appears to have succeeded in this objective. Generally, participants were comfortable with the level of content and skills the workshops aimed to develop. Most were comfortable with the pace of the workshops. Our impression was that many of the participants in early workshops were 'early adopters'

or those with an intrinsic interest in teaching online. Less competent and confident workshop participants (the 'second wave') raise new challenges for training staff in terms of providing appropriate support during workshops, while still covering enough of the necessary content, and this is reflected in recent survey responses complaining about 'information overload'.

The program is necessarily dynamic and evolutionary. We have been required to cater for not only the 'second wave' of workshop attendees, but also to provide challenging staff development opportunities for the early adopters who are now experienced WebCT users. At the same time, all workshop programs and associated resources must be updated regularly to accommodate new versions of software.

The current workshop program has been very successful with providing an introduction to not only the learning management system at Monash (WebCT), but also an introduction to online teaching and learning, the first such experience for many staff. Plans to extend this experience to more in-depth strategies for online teaching are underway.

At the same time, the training team are becoming more 'embedded' in different Faculty, School and Department groups. In some areas, members are active in committees making policy about online teaching and learning, and in other areas, we are project members providing ongoing support to groups developing online teaching resources. Initially, invitations to join these groups arose ad hoc from contacts made during the generic training workshops or by team members initiating contact with targeted committees, but involvement in these groups has become more systematic and is being encouraged at all levels across the University. During 2003, Monash University introduced a program of Unit Innovation Grants Scheme, where staff could apply for small grants to assist them integrate online learning in their campus-based programs. A criterion of these grants was for the successful applicant to collaborate with staff from the Higher Education Development Unit in their project, and this is also providing us with avenues to work with more staff across the institution.

Conclusions

After the first two years of providing a professional development program in online teaching, we believe our program has been very successful in its original objectives of introducing staff to Monash University's learning management system, while also introducing staff to the pedagogical issues involved. The program is continually evolving to involve further discussions of best practice in online teaching, to cater for different staff requirements, to provide the highest quality ongoing support to staff, and to accommodate changes in the software environment across the institution.

Large numbers of staff have progressed through the generic training program, and have access to ongoing support via a range of different resources. However, a program of this extent can only maintain its relevance by the training team being highly proactive in responding to perceived needs across the institution, flexible in their approach to dealing with different groups, and very supportive to staff at all levels. Our ongoing approach and collaborative work with our colleagues in faculties and departments continues to be iterative and diverse in a way that we hope sees the use of WebCT continue to evolve from educational considerations and professional development out of the needs of staff engaged in real work.

While we have attempted to 'cover all bases' in the diverse, integrated approach we have taken with the resources available to us in this early phase of the University's engagement with WebCT, we need to explore further the ways in which our activities might contribute to the kind of *sustainable curriculum change* towards student-centred flexible pedagogy to which Monash University aspires. Therefore we need to consider how we might 'innovate' in the field in regard to both 'training' strategies and organizational structures for change. Institutionally, it could be argued that Monash has begun to formulate an approach to implementation that reflects the 'Collis Twente Model' reported in Bottomley, Spratt & Rice (1999), which

> "seeks to make changes in pedagogy, use of technology, organisational cultures, organisational structures and the methodology (conduct) of work coevally, not sequentially, and throughout the initiation, implementation and institutionalisation phases of technology adoption"

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