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CULTIVATING THE HYBRID: A CASE STUDY OF A THREE YEAR EVOLUTION OF ELEARNING FOR BLENDED DELIVERY

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Abstract

This case study describes the process of the integration of eLearning at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT). After only three years, there are more than 500 courses with an online presence, most far beyond the static, online filing cabinet approach, and with use spread across almost all departments of the institute. The success is put down to the low key, no barrier approach taken, the deliberate cross pollination and the central and devolved support measures established. As a result, a large proportion of the institute's lecturing staff have added eLearning to their repertoire of teaching skills and the students graduate with enhanced IT literacy capability.

Keywords

Hybrid, blended, eLearning, staff development, integration

Introduction

Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) is a traditional trades based polytechnic with a small but increasing number of degree programmes. The funding base is calculated on around 4,500 EFTS (Equivalent Full Time Students), but the actual student population is 20,000+ bodies, with a large percentage of mature, adult, part time learners. Bates (2000a) contends that learning in the 21st century will be increasingly integrated with work and everyday life and organized in a way that suits the lifestyle and needs of individuals.

Although Bates also counsels against the adoption of a single eLearning approach or platform lest it “impose a serious restriction on academic freedom and could lead to a highly undesirable uniform approach to teaching and learning across all subjects” (2000b p.203) fiscal and other considerations such as ease of access, use and scalability prompted the decision in 2000 for MIT to use the web based course management system developed by Blackboard (named internally eMIT) primarily to meet the need to give present students greater flexibility of time, place and approach to learning.

As of July 2003, three years later, over 500 courses at Manukau have acquired an on-line presence on eMIT, ranging along a continuum from the static “on-line filing cabinet” in support of traditionally organised face to face classes, through those using a more blended approach to engender a higher degree of flexibility, to a few making full use of the eMIT features available to support learners completely at a distance, although this is rare. Blackboard use has been integrated across nearly all departments of MIT and into programmes from introductory certificate to degree level. The introduction of eMIT has enhanced staff teaching skill sets, adding online capability to their normal teaching repertoire and eMIT is becoming accepted as a normal extension to their teaching. Students are using it in increasing numbers and are thereby graduating with an IT enhanced profile. This paper outlines the process taken by the staff developer who fostered that growth and reflects on the reasons for the success.

The process

To ensure the success of the introduction of eLearning as an acceptable and common teaching strategy at MIT, various strategies were employed. A conscious decision was made to not adopt a highly controlled, project managed approach where special application had to be made, costed and approved in order to use eMIT. The underpinning philosophy was that eLearning is to be seen as a normal activity undertaken by professionals in the modern teaching world and not to be the preserve of the fearless or privileged few. As in most faculty, IT skill levels varied greatly and the computer or the web as a teaching tool was foreign to the majority.

We therefore started by identifying likely early adopters from among the lecturing staff and fostered them via one on one and group training sessions. Initially, introductory group and departmental workshops were offered to illustrate what was possible and appropriate in an online learning environment. “*So You Want to Use eMIT?*” courses were run in mixed mode (an initial session face to face then moving to flexible delivery) or completely on-line. These put staff into the role of eMIT students with specific 15 minute tasks to complete each day for a week in order for them to experience all the eMIT features from a student perspective before considering adding an online element to the course they were teaching. Subsequent workshops covered the basics of driving the system from the lecturer’s point of view.

The group sessions deliberately established an inter-departmental collegial network and thereby headed off a “Lone Ranger” situation where a sole departmental champion worked in isolation. These lecturers were gradually promoted as departmental “mentors” who could guide the adoption of eLearning in their own areas, illustrating the practical uses of eMIT for the department and the way it approached teaching and learning, and provide on the spot technical and pedagogical support in their discipline. Their presence provided the perfect counterpoint for those who were of the impression that eLearning was not suited to their subject area. The early adopters are now, in 2003, recognised as the departmental experts and play a significant role in determining which programmes will be re-developed into hybrid or blended models, and in supporting the staff who are making the transition to eMIT supported teaching.

A user group was established early in the innovation timeline - **METAL** (MIT Electronic Teaching And Learning Group) and an eMIT course of that name set up for all “instructors” on eMIT, to facilitate the swapping of useful tips and strategies and to jointly establish best practice. The METAL group now acts as a reference group for consultation on upgrades and subsequent developments of eMIT. The online course hosts any “learning objects” as examples of MIT developments so that they can be shared by other departments and continues to function as a repository for hints and best practice examples, many contributed by the members rather than the staff developer. Best Practice seminars are organised, where some of the recently learned lessons and tips are shared with current and prospective eMIT users. Often early adopters are invited to feature as presenters in these general sessions.

Now, in 2003, with the more widespread adoption of the hybrid model, training is focussed more on specific departmental development needs for the integration of web based activities beyond the “online filing cabinet” approach (where the static material is available 24/7) to make use of the more interactive features of the Blackboard platform as part of an emerging eLearning design which begins to replace face to face teaching with appropriate eMIT based activities. Acceptance of eMIT is high and lecturers are moving rapidly along the continuum. One in-house expert commented “There are a number of excellent users in our department. They are all very helpful to each other.” The enthusiasm of the early adopters has been harnessed for the good of their departments and their growing expertise has been made available to the wider institute through the collegiality and networks established in the evolving process.

Students are supported in their use of eMIT by hands on introductions, documentation, a Student Learning Centre which has its own course on eMIT and a Library Information Commons which has staff available to give assistance in eMIT access and use.

The result

Student acceptance of eMIT is high and use of the Blackboard platform to some degree in each of their courses is becoming expected. More than 8000 students are actively using eMIT this semester.

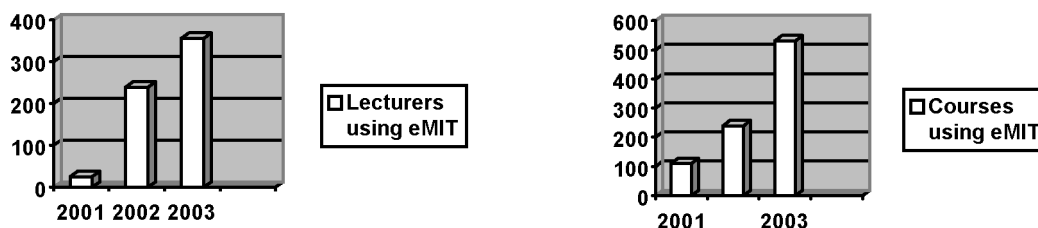


Figure 1: Growth of eMIT use 2001- 2003

Although criticised as a naïve model (Roberts 2002) even the online filing cabinet approach (at MIT it is regarded as Level One use) is serving the needs of a large proportion of the students at MIT. Research into student satisfaction with eMIT Level One use (Kelly & Herrick, 2002) revealed that 79% of the 199 respondents wanted eMIT to be available for all their courses, 76% stated that it helped them achieve their learning goals and 76% agreed that it provided useful information. Being able to access lecture slides, handouts and other static information 24/7 is a boon to part time students with family and work commitments and feedback collected shows a high degree of satisfaction from students with frequent comments such as

eMIT was great with accessing course information when you were unable to attend classes - especially downloading lecture notes and solutions to problems. Also very useful tool for lecturers to post our marks for certain assessments prior to handing back tests/assignments - it has certainly saved a lot of sleepless nights!!! Keep up the good work.

Use of eMIT often, but not always, begins at this level and is seen as a legitimate use of the platform because of the convenience to students. It is difficult to get accurate numbers because of the devolved development model adopted but probably about 30% of the eMIT supported courses provide only static material to students. The majority (60%) are now making Level Two use of eMIT. The hybrid model has meant that classes are now enhanced and to a growing degree substituted by eMIT related learning activities. Lecturers can identify the benefits for their students:

Students can discuss aspects of the learning encountered in the classroom while online, and they can work as groups on assignments from home. The classroom walls no longer exist! ...I can't imagine having to teach without eMIT.

The use of eMIT with face to face classes encourages students to be more adventurous in their use of technology

The use of eMIT is no longer considered an innovation. There is no compulsory element to its use by any department. It is not yet included as an item in the promotion path. It is not used largely as a means for students to access results as its sole function. It is not used as an assessment engine on a massive scale and yet it has been successfully integrated into more than 500 courses and its use has steadily grown over the three years it has been available. Why?

Why was the integration successful?

We set out to integrate eLearning to give all our students flexibility and access. We emphasised the integration as a “normal” extension to the teaching repertoire for face to face and flexible classes, not merely as a tool for distance classes. We chose a platform that required only minimal IT skills to master the basics. We did not waste precious time and resources creating interfaces or pictorial metaphors as

gateways to access the course material but stayed with the standard platform buttons and navigation features available. We designed for and supported cross pollination between departments. We ensured that it was only a comfortable stretch for those willing to give it a go. We fostered de-centralised pockets of expertise in departments and provided just in time central support and instruction in person and via the phone, which is appreciated by lecturers:

There is training, advice and help available whenever it is needed. The support staff are wonderful!

Support has been excellent. It allows real enthusiasts to move ahead, while allowing those less enthusiastic to discover at their own pace.

But probably most importantly, we had nothing compulsory with regard to how or when eMIT was to be used. We put no formal processes in place to act as barriers. We kept the cost of integration down. We worked with departments to plan for the gradual roll out across a programme of the online component. We used eLearning to replace face to face aspects of classes where appropriate. We made blended delivery part of the learning design.

Conclusion

The use of eMIT has continued to grow steadily at MIT. Lecturers have included eLearning in their repertoire of teaching skills and it is accepted as yet another way that MIT caters for the learning needs of its students. In her address at EDUCAUSE in 2002, Twigg speculated that the reason there may not yet be any significant difference in the results achieved from the use of eLearning when compared to those of face to face classes might be that there is nothing significantly different yet in the way we are using technology. History shows that early use of any technology does not make the best use of its potential—the first ATMs were **inside** banks after all! However, for Manukau Institute of Technology and its students, the low key, low barrier, highly supported process planned for its introduction has seen eMIT and eLearning successfully integrated, producing a hybrid or blended result which is well accepted and very effective.

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