

CREATING NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS OFF CAMPUS IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS: WHAT IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING ON CAMPUS?

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Abstract

For a university in regional Australia, a new degree program on offer to a remote campus and access centres, provided a supportive environment for faculty to trial new teaching and learning methods, specifically making use of learning management system (WebCT) for aspects of communication and content. This paper examines the impact this had on the faculty, in particular at the increased usage of ICT in subjects on offer on campus and also examines other issues which were identified as problematic by faculty as they embraced innovative methods of teaching and learning.

Keywords

Higher education, change management, staff development, ICT, Faculty of Arts, innovation, implementation, Learning Management System.

Introduction

The Faculty of Arts engages in the delivery of an undergraduate degree to a remote campus and three access centres at varying distances from the main campus. The degree is now in its third year of implementation, with its first graduates anticipated at the end of 2002, though some will continue to do honours. The Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment) has transcended the status quo of teaching and learning on the main campus in a number of areas:

- It is a new degree program and is only on offer off campus
- It is interdisciplinary
- It uses innovative teaching and learning practices
- It takes advantage of the availability of new technologies for teaching and learning, including web-based learning and videoconferencing
- The subjects have often been collaboratively developed with other staff from inside and outside the faculty including the library, learning development and educational development (See Albury, Lefoe, Littler, & Trivett, 2001; Curtis, Lefoe, Merten, Milne, & Albury, 1999).

The literature abounds with tales of innovation in teaching and learning in higher education, and with the many success stories individual faculty or “lone rangers” achieve using technology to support and improve learning (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Some higher education institutions acknowledge that for these innovations to be mainstreamed however, there needs to be a more collaborative approach to change, and that where a group of innovative individuals work together for a

common goal, this is more likely to achieve the continuation of the innovation after the initial implementation (Collis & De Boer, 1999; Sorg et al., 1999; Taylor, 1999a). At the University of Wollongong, as the planning for the first graduation and for the honours year is put in place, a number of questions surface about the future of this innovative degree, but most certainly a key one from a faculty and a staff development perspective, is concerned with the impact the degree program had on teaching and learning in the Faculty of Arts since its implementation in 2000.

During an initial interview the (then) Dean of Arts identified one of the key purposes of the innovation:

For me personally I was convinced about it [the innovation] because I saw it as a good way into changing and rethinking the ways in which humanities and social sciences could be taught. So not simply a matter of delivery but really an opportunity to rethink what it means to teach and in some ways it's providing a, I can't say teaching qualification, but a teaching experience for people. The opportunity to think differently about their teaching (Interview with Lefoe, January, 2000).

The academic staff engaged in the early planning workshops to develop the new degree also indicated the importance of this impact on campus when they anticipated future outcomes through the completion of a Goal Attainment Scale (Curtis, 1998). They stated that if achieving better than expected then:

Curriculum delivery in Nowra has revolutionised on campus offering. Arts is in high demand and staff numbers are expanded. Production of subjects has facilitated efficient technological cross fertilisation in both curriculum design and student learning capabilities. The Nowra Arts degree is better than on campus degree and hosts top honours students." (March, 1998, Working party minutes, attachment.)

At management and grass roots level there was a recognition that this program would provide an opportunity to try out new ideas about teaching and learning, and in particular to use information and communication technology (ICT) in a supportive environment. This paper examines how well predictions for the future match realities three years into the new degree program. Whilst acknowledging three years is probably too early to anticipate a major flow on to mainstream the innovation, it provides opportunity to reflect on what has happened and perceptions of the current status on campus in the Faculty of Arts. There are too many variables to attribute all changes to teaching and learning in the faculty to this innovation, but the main players have certainly been people willing to take a lead role in the faculty especially in incorporating the use of technology in their subjects, in supporting their colleagues and in sharing their knowledge of teaching and learning with other academics both within the institution and without.

Background

The last few years have seen a period of rapid change in higher education in Australasia and overseas as government funding cuts hit universities, requiring them to do more with less while still addressing access and equity issues for different sectors of the student population (CRFEFP, 1998). ICT was seen to play a large part in this development for on campus and off campus delivery of subjects (Barraket & DETYA, 2000; Tinkler, Smith, Ellyard, & Cohen, 1994) but for some faculties the interest or need to use these technologies was given a low priority (Cochrane, Ellis, & Johnston, 1993) particularly in Social Sciences and Humanities where face to face interaction has always been valued (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, ARC, & NBEET, 1998). As the move from elite to mass education continues and class sizes increase significantly, new ways of addressing the teaching and learning needs in these areas are required (DEET, 1993). It is also well documented that the student profile is changing and that students spend more time supporting themselves (and their families) whilst attending university (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). Many universities have been able to attract growth funds through expansion of their offerings to rural and remote areas or areas with perceived disadvantage by providing satellite campuses and access centres to attract local students (Chalmers, 1999; DEET & Baldwin, 1992; Fuller, 1996; Taylor, 2001).

For the University of Wollongong, the provision of growth funds to expand offerings on the south coast, the far south coast, and the southern highlands of NSW through a new campus and access centres also provided an environment for academic staff to rethink their teaching. The need to incorporate the use of

ICT in this teaching became essential to provide the much-needed communication between the distant centres and the campus in Wollongong. Many of the subject developers trialed new methods of teaching and learning, in particular using WebCT, a course management system, with their on campus students prior to the opening of the centres in 2000 and continued as each year of the degree program was implemented. Some of the earlier findings have been reported elsewhere (Albury et al., 2001; Lefoe, Gunn, & Hedberg, 2002).

This paper provides a reflection on the impact on teaching and learning on campus of insights developed by the current practice of off campus teaching in the Faculty of Arts. The authors acknowledge that not all of the change to teaching practice can be attributed to the off campus developments. Nevertheless, we believe that the rapid take-up of new teaching and learning methods, in particular the use of ICT in the on campus environment, has been driven by the necessity to use these methods with these students at remote centres. The need to learn collectively how to teach in remote centres provided a group of academic staff with a safe and supportive environment to trial new teaching methods. Development of a new degree to be delivered using ICT provided a focus for curriculum change in the Faculty of Arts.

Context: The innovation

In a research study on innovation in higher education, Hannan and Silver identified the reasons innovative teachers will take on such a challenge:

It seems that innovators will take on extra work, learn new skills, court unpopularity with other staff and take risks with their own careers so long as they feel that by doing so they can improve the quality of their teaching, and/or, if they feel that circumstances are such that they have no choice but to depart from their old methods to cope with new demands (Hannan & Silver, 2000, p.32).

The faculty engaged in the development for this degree certainly displayed a very strong commitment to their teaching through what can only be described as some challenging times.

After several years of discussion, a committee in the Faculty of Arts finally agreed on the subjects for a new degree program, Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment). The degree was one of two on offer to provide access to higher education for students in the areas around Nowra, Batemans Bay, Bega and (later) in Moss Vale, on the south coast and southern highlands of NSW. There was to be a degree of flexibility in the delivery, though certainly anticipating low initial numbers meant that the subjects on offer would always be very limited.

In this particular project, the more traditional methods of teaching, which were the established methods of the disciplines, were not necessarily practiced by the innovators who were often junior academics. Many of the more senior members of the disciplines were reluctant to engage in or support the interdisciplinary discussions that were a key part of the development phase of the degree. Certainly the concept of crossing the tribal boundaries through interdisciplinary subject development in Arts has been the subject of earlier discussion in the literature (Becher, 1989), and particularly the impact this can have on new academic staff who may do so inadvertently, as well as crossing other tacit boundaries by making teaching their focus rather than research, by using technology in their teaching in a department where the culture may frown on such innovative practices as taking time away from the real job!

The innovation in this context involved thinking about new ways to deliver subjects where the learning environment is distributed across place and time. It involved finding ways to use technology, not only to provide content to students through such things as e-readings, but also to support communication between lecturers, tutors and students. It involved thinking about ways to modularise subjects so that relevant modules could be used for different cohorts and finally being flexible about teaching methods used, in particular recognising that videoconferencing could not be used for lecturing but was a great tool for occasional meetings with students and tutors for discussions. Whilst the faculty did not have strong ownership of the project because the decision to proceed had made at a higher level, ultimately the leadership provided at the faculty executive level meant the development team took ownership and supported each other through the development phase of the new degree.

There were two new subjects developed for the south coast degree, the rest were subjects offered on campus, though often in a different form. Whilst there was limited funding available, there was money allocated for each subject to be used as required providing support for subject development. Flexibility and the ability to make use of methods developed for the coast were often limited by departmental politics. For example, one subject was designed to replace lectures with a printed study guide, to guide tutor led tutorials at the local centres. This subject also had a WebCT site to support communication between the centres and with the subject coordinator on campus. However on campus, the same subject was coordinated by a different person, and used traditional lecture/tutorial format but did not make use of the developed materials, despite their availability. Another subject, on offer in all centres trialed the new teaching methods with on-campus students first, then continued to use these methods, incorporating in particular discussions between student cohorts across all centres, facilitated by tutors across all centres, ensuring the new practice became part of the subject in all areas. Yet another subject developer decided that a fully online subject was a good way to encourage interaction between all centres. The tutors at each centre (and in Wollongong) have a tutorial group with members across all centres. This has meant interaction not only between the students at all centres, but also between the tutors across all the centres.

Impact on campus teaching

Although only three years into the innovation, we are beginning to see evidence of the impact on teaching in the Faculty of Arts through a number of areas. The impact falls into two categories: the development of a community of practice, first among those in the South Coast Project and then expanded to include a wider group of colleagues and second, in the rewards and recognition achieved by the individuals involved in the innovation.

Building a community of practice

The establishment of a community of practice was central to the ability of the relatively junior academics involved in the original project development group to rethink and transform their curriculum development and teaching practices to meet the challenge of the distributed learning environment (Albury et al., 2001; Curtis et al., 1999; Scott, 1999). The characteristics of a community of practice (Stuckey, Hedberg, & Lockyer, 2001) were strongly in evidence amongst the group:

- a clear purpose driven by the members,
- employment of appropriate technologies and styles of communication,
- membership of a social network where their expertise, leadership, content and contributions are valued, and
- providing ongoing discussion, sharing of, and collaboration on, commonly valued things.

The members displayed a willingness to expand the community as new staff members joined and other faculty members displayed an interest in becoming involved.

The pattern of teaching and learning in the Faculty was based upon traditional disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and social sciences and upon the conventional lecture/tutorial presentation of content. Even face-to-face teaching innovations like group work were dependent on the continuing commitment of a particular academic to a subject. The use of technologies, even obvious ones like statistics software in research methods subjects, had to be renegotiated year by year. The commitment by the Faculty to a degree program offered through a network of access centres required a commitment to the institutionalisation of innovations regardless of the academic staff involved in teaching and a change in the accepted assumptions about 'ownership' of subjects.

During the development phase of the degree the regular meetings of the South Coast Project developers group created a safe place to explore those assumptions and to try new ideas.

The most active members of that group began to explore the similarities and differences among the disciplinary approaches to knowledge represented in the group (e.g. History, English Literature,

Sociology), to discuss and experiment with innovative teaching techniques using ICT as well as print materials and to support each other in most aspects of academic life. They began to trust and work with members of academic and student support units outside the faculty to improve their teaching materials and student learning outcomes and to understand a broader view of academic work within the University. They examined closely the way new technologies could support this change. The camaraderie of the group work led some to identify themselves as 'core developers'. The enthusiasm led several to discuss the issues within their teaching programs and with other like-minded academics. They also applied their knowledge of innovation to the delivery of on campus subjects in ways ranging from introducing electronic discussion elements to developing an on line library assignment that is transferable between subjects. The combination of talk and demonstration of innovation drew others to rethink their own teaching.

The rethinking does not constitute a revolution in modes of teaching and learning but a more modest beginning at reworking the 'web of rules' in which the Arts academics work (Taylor, 1999b). New staff joining the faculty have been attracted to the energy and support for learning to use ICTs in education as well as the small financial support for curriculum development within the South Coast initiative. The activity viewed by long term academics in the faculty as a new and worrying development is regarded by the newcomers as an established part of academic work in Arts that offers an opportunity for career development on the cutting edge of current academic practice. They have offered new subjects to the BA degree and followed the now established development pattern of trailing some innovation with an on campus cohort of students before extending the learning package to the entire network. In addition, the core subjects in the degree must be taught even when the original subject developer is on study leave. This has meant that academics outside the original South Coast group have been recruited to coordinate a subject for one session only. That role allows them to explore the technology without the commitment to subject development. Even this level of engagement with the distributed learning environment challenges some to rethink aspects of their teaching, and in one case has convinced one lecturer of the value of the project as a contribution to his teaching practice (Trowler, 1998).

Academics from the original group of developers have become formal or informal teaching mentors for their colleagues, discussing teaching issues, assessment tasks and ways to use an appropriate level of technological support in their subjects. Some of the 'core developers' became known as experts in the use of WebCT and acted as consultants to colleagues who were uncertain about using the new technology. They have also provided connections with members of other units who can provide the necessary skill development and support. The uptake of the use of ICTs on the Wollongong campus has taken a different form than the South Coast teaching. Lecturers have been drawn to ICTs for reasons that may at first seem peripheral to rethinking 'what it means to teach'. One felt compelled to establish a support web site for his first year subject as a result of the demands by students who had studied a subject coordinated by one of the core developers during the previous semester. For others, having a subject website reduces the burden of heavier teaching loads by having the subject outline and some set readings available electronically (less photocopying for late enrollees and those who lose paperwork). As the use of electronic resources has begun to enter the mainstream, the work of preparing those resources has also become a task for some faculty based general staff rather than the preserve of experts elsewhere.

Certainly the number of WebCT subject sites supporting teaching and learning in the Faculty of Arts has increased from 18 sites in 2000, to 43 in 2001 then 47 in 2002. As the university quality assurance processes improve, other data is becoming available as to how the sites are used in teaching from initial optional use in subjects to a variety of uses, as indicated in Table 1.

Type of use	Number of subjects
Participation online is optional for students	16
Students must use the web to interact with the educational content necessary for study	8
Students must use the web to communicate with staff and/or other students	4
Students must use the web to both interact with content and to communicate with staff and/or other students	19

Table 1. WebCT use in Faculty of Arts, 2002

At the same time, staff working on subject delivery for the access centres have continued to collaborate with members of units outside the faculty to improve teaching and learning. One staff member has been revising her subject in collaboration with a member of the Learning Development group to include more formal scaffolding of the generic skills developed within the subject. Two others have spent time as Fellows with Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), working with the technical staff to develop learning objects that have applicability beyond their subjects – each with a third collaborator from another unit. The development of a shared vision, as identified by Senge (1992) and Fullan (1993), has underpinned the innovation, whereby a broad commitment has eventually developed in the wider group as people have identified aspects of the project which reflect their own beliefs. Whilst engaging a wider ownership of the innovation beyond the initial development group has been challenging, Trowler (1998) points out that ownership and understanding are “developed and sustained by hands-on experience and by giving room for experimentation and adaption” (p.154).

Rewards and Recognition

The literature points to the lack of reward and recognition within the formal structures of the institution as one of the biggest obstacles in the path of innovation in higher education (Hannan & Silver, 2000; Silver, 1998). In spite of resistance from many colleagues early in the project, participants in the BA on the South Coast have not suffered the extremes of lack of recognition experienced or feared elsewhere. All Faculty of Arts academics involved in the original 1998 – 1999 group of subject developers, who applied, had their probationary contracts converted or achieved a promotion. In 2002 two subject coordinators won the Vice Chancellor’s award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching and Learning (OCTAL) for their innovative collaboration in Australian Studies. The Coordinator of the Bega Education Access Centre and the Librarian at one campus received General Staff Awards in 2002 for their contributions to the success of the programmes. Six students from Bega, Batemans Bay and Nowra were on the Dean’s Merit List for the top 5% of students in 2001. A human geographer previously won an OCTAL for his subject now offered as a part of the BA and an Australian Publishing award for the textbook for that subject. The three OCTAL winners have been nominated by the University for National Teaching awards. In addition to the personal recognition for members of the group, four projects led by South Coast academics have received internal educational strategic development funding to extend innovations to wider groups within the faculty or the University.

Members of the South Coast subject developers and coordinators group have been invited to make presentations to key teaching and learning events on campus including the Vice Chancellor’s Symposium on Innovative Teaching and Learning, the University Education Committee and the compulsory Introduction to Tertiary Teaching course for new staff. They are invited to contribute their expertise to new groups of subject developers from other faculties and to international visitors in the field of technological innovation in teaching and learning. These forms of personal and public recognition have contributed to the confidence of many of the subject coordinators who feel able to intervene in policy discussions about teaching and learning on the basis of their experience. They are able to see some of the opportunities as well as threats that are a part of the changing higher education sector.

Lessons learned and recommendations for moving into the mainstream

The delivery of a degree program at a distance has identified many assumptions, processes and policies on campus that need to be changed to better support teaching, especially innovative teaching. At the faculty level there needs to be better understanding of the teaching and subject administrative demands of teaching in a distributed learning environment and better processes and policies to support those demands. At the university level, the need for reform is more complex including a variety of administrative issues, a funding model that maintains the support for high quality subject delivery, support for an ongoing cycle of review and improvement and a developed policy of technical support that includes infrastructure and support personnel.

In spite of the recognition of the achievements of the group, within the faculty the formal workloads agreements continue to be based on the assumptions of conventional pattern of lectures and tutorials with face-to-face teaching. Those who teach differently are required to negotiate any differences in the workload by explaining their practice in terms of the conventional pattern. In the face of increasing student numbers and thus workloads on campus, members of the South Coast group made a submission to the Faculty workloads committee. In July there was still not open discussion of the differences in load of the different modes and places of delivery of subjects, nor of the added time needed to supervise tutors at a distance.

Another issue, which had to be addressed at the institution level, was the need for ongoing tutor training at the remote centres as there have been limited funds for this training since the first year and only a small number of new tutors to attend training. This did however highlight a need for tutor training and support on the Wollongong campus, where plans are now in place to pilot a program for training for all tutors.

Where new teaching and learning strategies are developed for off campus modes, the flexibility may suit on campus students as well. Many subjects offered on the South Coast are now taught in the same way on campus. This is not always well received by students, who may not have the same commitment or interest in student centred subjects, which require them to take responsibility for their own learning, especially where a subject may require limited face-to-face contact and be mostly on line, as is the case for two of the subjects.

The south coast implementation has identified many processes and policies on campus that needed to be changed to improve teaching administration. Planning issues which were often solved on the spot in the local situation required specified policies and procedures when other centres were involved eg on campus it is possible to change a class location or time for a tutor to meet the needs of the student group but when there are four other centres involved and a videoconference will run from Wollongong, then timetabling changes become a significant organisational issue.

Policies and procedures are gradually being put into place on campus such as a (draft) statement of the subject coordinator's role and the tutor's role. There are also quality assurance processes in place for initiation of web sites, faculty service agreements for subject level design and support. In addition there is a need for recognition of the requirements of students at a distance by other units who administer within the university (for example, research ethics approval, careers advice, learning development, etc) some of this is happening, but frequently procedures are not yet in place.

Conclusion

Innovative teaching and learning practices in higher education institutions have frequently been the domain of "lone rangers"(Taylor, 1998). However for innovative practice to be embraced by larger numbers of faculty, then an environment that supports change is critical. For the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong a new degree program offered to a remote campus and access centres provided an environment for faculty to trial new teaching and learning methods. As these academics found success in their new methods they used them in their on campus subjects as well, and provided support for other faculty members through a community of practice, sharing their new knowledge and skills. In order to mainstream such innovations the structures are needed to support the implementation and its continuation from top down and bottom up.

Whilst new curriculum development has not yet “revolutionised on campus offering” as mentioned in the Goal Attainment Scale, the on campus offerings in Arts have certainly incorporated new teaching and learning methods at a faster rate than expected. The student numbers are expanding and there are indeed some top honours students enrolled for 2003, however expansion of staff numbers is unlikely in the current climate. Fullan (1993) reminds us that universities cannot mandate the development of skill and commitment, “The only alternative that works is creating conditions that enable and press people to consider personal and shared visions, and skill development through practice overtime” (p.23). This initiative has provided such conditions.

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