Walk, don't run: Achieving balance in professional development for academics moving online

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Abstract

Professional development for academic staff moving online may take a variety of forms. This paper describes an experiential, contextualised model in which online discussions are regarded as texts and a genre-based approach is used to describe online discussions and to sequence activities. This approach seeks to balance time, place and mode, technology and pedagogy and experience and reflection. A pilot of a training module developed using this approach is described and evaluated.

Introduction

In April 2004, the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney embarked on a three-year project that would see a large number of its courses move online. Academic staff were to be involved in collaborative course design and would be expected to teach their courses partly or fully online. Given that only about 10% of them had prior experience of online teaching, professional development was considered essential.

Supporting staff moving online

The skills involved in teaching online have been variously described and categorised. For example, Salmon (2000) stresses that meaning-making rather than content transmission is required, and considers content expertise, an understanding of the online environment, technical skills, online communication skills and personal characteristics to be essential.

The range of methods used by academics to develop themselves in general, including for their teaching role, has been well documented (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Ferman, 2002) and includes formal and informal self-development, collegial activities and mentoring. Ellis, O'Reilly and Debreceny (1998) identified a preference for traditional means (face-to-face presentations, short courses) over online means while Ferman (2002, p. 147) observed that workshops and short courses were valued despite there being 'little evidence for [their] long-term efficacy'. Regarding developing staff moving online specifically, Clegg (2000, p. 145) identified a tension between 'building theoretical understanding and providing practical instruction' in the light of immediate needs while Hanrahan, Ryan and Duncan (2001) recommend that such training be localised and embedded in work practice rather than centralised and decontextualised. More recently, O'Reilly and Brown (2001) and O'Reilly and Ellis (2002) document an immersive approach to developing staff for developing and teaching online courses, while Ellis and Phelps (2000) describe an action learning model.

At the University of Sydney, professional development for developing, managing and teaching in flexible learning environments is predominantly but not exclusively delivered in centralised workshops addressing the needs of academics from a wide range of disciplines. This professional development is of necessity decontextualised and generic. For the School of Public Health project, it was decided to run local, contextualised PD specifically related to the School's processes and templates.

Design considerations 1: Balancing time, place and mode, technology and pedagogy

In the interests of congruence and to model good practice, the preference for workshops identified above needed to be balanced with the need to deliver some of the PD online. Constraints on staff time and the fact that many worked off campus also needed to be considered, leading to the adoption of a blended approach: workshops for core technical skills alternating with online tasks spread over one or more weeks.

Three modules were supported by purpose-built online courses, allowing participants to experience the online environment as students and then as teaching assistants. Within each module technology and reflection on pedagogy were integrated. The third module, which addressed moderating online discussions, will now be examined in more detail.

Design considerations 2: Balancing experience and reflection

Modules 1 and 2 used an experiential approach, as implied by the concept of congruence mentioned above: learning to teach online by learning online and experiencing the online environment at first hand, rather than learning *about* online teaching. This would be necessary but not sufficient in Module 3, a more overtly 'pedagogical' topic that presented additional design challenges.

Given that teaching and learning by means of online discussions are necessarily mediated by language, genre theory, a pedagogical model commonly used to teach spoken and written communication skills, was the approach selected both for exploring what constitutes an online discussion and for structuring the flow of activities. This is one of many possible approaches to developing staff for online moderation.

Genre theory in its linguistic rather than literary form is succinctly described by Martin (1984, p. 25) as a 'staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture', in other words a socially-constructed text type which incidentally may be written or spoken, formal or informal, simple or complex. It is created and understood by a discourse community and also shapes that community. The communicative purpose and socio-cultural context of the genre shape the schematic structure of the discourse as well as its content and language. Online discussions have had a relatively short history but nonetheless there is a significant body of examples that have been (to some extent) described and analysed. Online discussions are used by an identifiable discourse community, and 'rules of discourse' are starting to emerge, for example, netiquette and the 'weaving' of postings into a text that summarises contributions and seeks to move the discussion forward.

A start has also been made in describing the structure of online discussions. For example, Salmon (2000) identified five stages in online discussions in an educational context: access and motivation; online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. However, genre structure may turn out to be more context-sensitive than Salmon implies, and may change as the genre evolves and users become more technologically literate and comfortable with the genre. The genre model was chosen as a descriptive tool, to introduce academics to online discussions as a distinct but unfamiliar genre and to focus them on the communication, linguistic and strategic features of these texts.

Teaching a genre is usually based on the genre teaching model (Callaghan, 1988). The version of this model used has four stages: modelling (participants experience the genre, usually by reading or listening to it), analysis (identifying and describing the structure, linguistic features and discourse strategies), joint construction (assisted, scaffolded by teacher or peers) and finally individual construction, where the 'apprentice' creates the text type without assistance. This model was chosen as a means of sequencing activities as it allows for a balance (or cycle) of experiential learning and reflection, as well as providing a logical development of activities.

The module developed consisted of:

- *Stage 1: Modelling*: participants took part in an online discussion that followed Salmon's five stages and covered topics relevant to online learning. Many of these tasks were open-ended, and participants were expected to develop solutions based on their own ideas and experience (problem-based, constructivist). The moderator modeled common strategies such as welcoming, encouraging and weaving. Resources such as readings, summaries and 'stories from the front line' were provided.

- *Stage 2: Analysis*: in a face-to-face workshop, participants reflected on the structure and strategies of the discussion and were shown further models of moderation.

- *Stage 3: Joint construction*: DIY Discussions: Participants were asked to set up and moderate online tasks in pairs, to take part in discussions set up by their peers and to reflect on both moderating and participating.

- *Stage 4: Individual construction* would occur in real courses the following semester.

Evaluation 1: Walking

The module was trialled from September 2004 to January 2005 with 10 academics, the majority with fewer than 10 years' teaching experience and good to very good computer and internet skills. Participation in Stage 1 was initially enthusiastic, but waned as time passed, so that some of the more complex topics and 'constructivist' activities received little attention. The workshop (Stage 2) rekindled interest and most participants created a DIY discussion (Stage 3), though participation in their peers' discussions tailed off and no participants participated in the reflective task.

The module was evaluated by observation and (facilitator) reflection, an online survey (response rate: 27%) and interviews with 6 participants, four of whom were, by that time, moderating discussions with students. Course delivery and resources were generally well regarded and participants noted increased confidence in their ability to moderate online discussions. The timing of the training and time constraints on participation were mentioned by most, with suggestions that participation should be 'forced' and strict time limits rigidly enforced. Interestingly, several participants requested more face-to-face time.

Localised, contextualised PD provided an opportunity to work within the design model and procedures for the School's courses and with peers who have shared content and issues. For one participant at least this led to a sense of belonging to a community: "Working on this course … is the first time I have felt a real connection with the activity of the School …".

The experiential approach taken (being an online learner) was intended as a low risk simulation designed to reality-test the technical, pedagogical and strategic aspects of going online. This approach was highly rated: "It was great to be able to see WebCT from the point of view of students". This mirrors O'Reilly and Ellis' experience (2002, p. 492). It may not have been experienced as low risk, however, particularly in the beginning. The facilitator observed emotional responses such as frustration, fear of losing face, the awkwardness of public self-disclosure, the difficulty of organising group activities online and the disappointment of activities not taken up ("When no-one came to my activity I was disappointed but I understood"). This experience may help prospective moderators to empathise with students. The benefits of role reversal described by O'Reilly and Ellis (2002, p. 493) also applied in this case.

However, an experiential approach such as this has its limitations: the context was shared but roles were not authentic and the discourse community, while authentic in some sense, did not equate to a discourse community of students in a course and their moderator. The gap between practice and real life is perhaps unavoidable in training ("The hands-on and simulation were good as far as they went but you don't really engage with it unless it's real") and time-poor academics seem to have calculated the point at which to drop out ("I didn't really get involved in the DIY activity because of lack of time and also because I felt I would be able to do it anyway once it came to the real life situation, and I could").

Evaluation 2: Running

Although the experiential approach to technical skills and participation in discussions was successful, participants did not engage much with the discussion activities which were more complex, problem based or constructivist, nor did they complete the DIY activities and reflect on their experiences of moderation and being moderated. These had been included to model pedagogical approaches they might attempt in their own courses. It is not clear whether this failure to engage resulted from lack of interest or lack of time. In addition, comments in the evaluations reflected at least some expectation of a directive, content-delivery rather than a constructivist, exploratory approach: "I guess you're going to put up some guidelines about this?" "I would have preferred to see the discussion structure before we started" (presented rather than analysed).

These comments suggest that, as Clegg (2000) found, participants are focussed on the mechanics of the new technology and practical strategies for a new learning environment (walking). They seem to be less interested in complex pedagogical discussions and analysis and public reflection (running) at this early stage. It may be that pedagogical complexity needs to be avoided; in short, introductory courses such as this and engagement with higher order activity types may need to be deferred until practical concerns are met.

Conclusion

Successful features of the module were its local, contextualized and experiential nature (with some reservations). The genre teaching cycle structured activities in a meaningful developmental sequence, although not all participants completed them. Genre theory is a potentially useful descriptive and explanatory tool for focusing prospective moderators on the communication aspects of the task. It also serves to remind us that we are members of a discourse community using a broad range of academic (and other) genres on a daily basis and that we need to remember to induct new members, particularly our students, into those genres if we wish them to participate effectively in academic life.

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