Refreshing the eLearning guidelines: realigning rhetoric and reality

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First launched in 2005, the New Zealand eLearning Guidelines (NZeLgs) provided a set of questions to drive improvement in the tertiary sector's capability to deliver eLearning. This paper describes a joint AKO Aotearoa/New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) funded project which has updated and enhanced the guidelines (eLg) for the tertiary sector during 2013 /2014 and which now provides access via a new website: (www.elg.ac.nz). The guidelines provide prompts for good practice as a guide to designing, implementing and enhancing eLearning for an expanded range of participants in the process – the learner, the teacher, the manager, the organisational leader and quality assurance bodies. The process of how the refreshed guidelines came to be will be shared, along with the principles underpinning the prompts for each of the different perspectives which have been designed to foster quality provision of eLearning for the sector.

Keywords: eLearning, eLearning guidelines, prompts for practice, effective practice, perspectives

Introduction

eLearning has matured rapidly and is now a given in most tertiary contexts. Every provider seems to have some form of online provision for its students, and has had for some time. (Gunn, 2010; JISC, 2011; Guiney, 2011). However quality varies and remains a challenge (Brown, 2013).

The New Zealand e-Learning Guidelines (NZeLgs) were originally developed for the tertiary sector in 2005. They were to drive improvement in capability and enable practitioners to share good practice in eLearning provision, staff development and planning for eLearning. Following the themes in the literature of the time, the guidelines were developed in consultation, suggested good practice - via questions - and were enabling and localized. (Milne & Suddaby, 2005). The intended audiences were teaching staff, managers and support staff, and the questions addressed teaching activity and principles such as best practice, collaboration, innovation and learner-centeredness. Presented as a cube, the Guidelines were hosted on a wiki, so that they could be further developed as eLearning understanding evolved. The NZeLgs framework generated 21 implementation projects (Milne & Hegarty, 2008), one of which was undertaken by New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC).

NZTC implementation case study using the 2005 NZeLgs

New Zealand Tertiary College is an early childhood education (ECE) qualifications provider whose students are high touch, low tech covering a wide age range. NZTC though saw the potential to offer a viable alternative to classroom learning through the use of quality online provision. The flexibility it offers students was highlighted by Du Plessis, Walker & Naughton (2008), where student teachers are not prevented from attending class for geographical reasons or are constrained by class schedules, but instead could use web-enhanced distance learning to complete their studies. Key to the approach was the utilization of the original NZeLgs.

When embarking on the move to eLearning provision, the NZeLgs provided challenging questions to which the staff at the institute had to provide answers. Each Guideline was considered, agonized over, and answered via a process involving all levels of the organization so that implantation could be achieved with as high a quality as possible. The result was a clear organizational approach to online eLearning provision in ECE encompassing policies, procedures, learning design and delivery, as explained in the original case study (Fox, 2008).

Audited by the eMaturity Model (eMM) in 2010 the organization was found to have robust structures and processes that took into account all aspects of the design, implementation and support for students in the eLearning environment (Marshall, 2010). A second audit in 2012 was even more pleasing, finding improved, sustainable and appropriate processes in place (Marshall, 2012). By comparison with other tertiary providers, NZTC had enhanced their provision even further by strengthening any weak areas revealed in the first audit, again relying on the 2005 NZeLgs to achieve this. The College recently celebrated five years of online provision for students.

But that was based on the **2005** version of the guidelines, now somewhat dated (Springett, 2012) as eLearning

has evolved and become commonplace. The next section describes the outcomes of a joint AKO Aotearoa / NZTC project "Raising the eBar: Reviewing and implementing the New Zealand eLearning Guidelines".

Refreshing the guidelines

The intention of this current project was to update the guidelines thereby enhancing their usability and accessibility. The task was to identify those guidelines that were effective and did not need to change, those seen as effective but in need of updating since 2005,and remodel those no longer effective, in line with current literature and practice. The project would also develop **new** guidelines where gaps were identified.

The approach

The refreshing of the guidelines began with an extensive document analysis. The existing guidelines were investigated for currency against a backdrop of literature review and modern practice, including other benchmarks such as those produced by ACODE (2007) and the QAA Code of Practice (2010) and revised where appropriate. The original guidelines had three perspectives: learner, teacher and manager. The gap analysis suggested value in including the perspectives of organizational leaders and quality assurance bodies, as these audiences had not been considered in the original project. These additional perspectives would hopefully prove advantageous for quality assurance bodies needing questions to ask around eLearning, and organizational leaders proposing to include eLearning aspects in their vision and strategic planning.

The guidelines development mirrored the principles established by the original project: to be developed in consultation, to be presented as suggestions, to be enabling and to be localized (Milne and Suddaby, 2005). The new guidelines associated with each of the five points of view were then grouped into the phases of designing, teaching and evaluation and circulated for further consultation.

An expert review panel was established (the eLg Reference Group) comprising both local and overseas contributors. Panel members included teaching practitioners, researchers, a librarian, IT specialists, academic support specialists and the New Zealand Tertiary eLearning Reference Group, and their input was regularly sought on both the scope and appropriateness of the emerging guidelines. The guidelines went through several drafts as a result. In parallel, the eLg Reference Group was asked to contribute resource material to support later implementation.

In addition, there was extensive consultation about the design and ease of use of the website for the access to the materials as part of the review process and suggestions were implemented leading up to the launch.

The perspectives

The **refreshed** eLearning guidelines (eLg) are prompts for good practice and again take the form of questions to which Yes/No answers are not expected. They contain five perspectives.

- **Learner** perspective - which is the student voice, and encourages users to examine their practice and delivery from the learner point of view. It includes the expectations, requirements and participation of learners in the process. While not specifically targeting students, is does comprise the kinds of questions students would want answered.
- **Teacher** perspective – which considers practice from the educator's point of view. It includes the development of teachers for eLearning, their different roles in the process and the evaluation of practice.
- **Manager** perspective – this encompasses the wide range of management positions, reflecting the increasing diversity of managers involved in the process. They are asked to consider the support they give to the eLearning process, and the prompts include policies and procedures that underpin eLearning provision.
- **Organizational leaders** perspective– this is where the vision for eLearning is considered, and also includes the strategic planning and financial aspects of eLearning provision.
- **Quality assurance bodies** perspective – this perspective encourages consideration of practice from the point of view of accrediting bodies. It includes underlying principles, policies and processes in relation to the vison. An accreditation panel should expect organisations to be able to answer such questions.

The questions are further grouped into the phases of **designing**, **implementing** and **enhancing**.

The **Designing** prompts encompass the planning, design and preparation of eLearning and assessment materials for delivery to a set of learners. They consider collaborative design, teaching, learner skills, needs and support.

The **Implementing** prompts are to support the effective delivery of eTeaching and eLearning, considering teaching, collaboration, professional development and technical aspects. The **Enhancing** prompts probe the planning for ongoing improvement and sustainability for eLearning, considering ongoing professional development and the gathering and use of evidence for continued improvement and effectiveness.

The guidelines are by no means considered complete, and will, hopefully, be added to as time passes, more research into eLearning is completed and more effective practice emerges.

The website and resources

The eLg are presented on www.elg.ac.nz a purpose built website which provides quick access to the guidelines for each perspective. The **guidelines** are available for download in PDF format to enable users to focus on a particular point of view, and investigate their practice. The prompts will either confirm effective practice or uncover an aspect worthy of further investigation.

A **workbook** is available for each perspective, again in PDF format, to support interaction with the guidelines and application within a tertiary organization. It is expected that users will assemble evidence in order to answer the prompt or initiate a plan to implement a necessary improvement in an area revealed by the guideline.

There are associated **background resources** for each perspective, which are available for advice when the answer to the prompt was "no". A collection of universal resources which apply to all perspectives is provided in addition to those for the individual perspectives.

The resource set contains no material older than 2009, and all are freely available to access, nearly all by the link included in the PDF, and they will be updated regularly by the community which is anticipated will form around the guidelines.
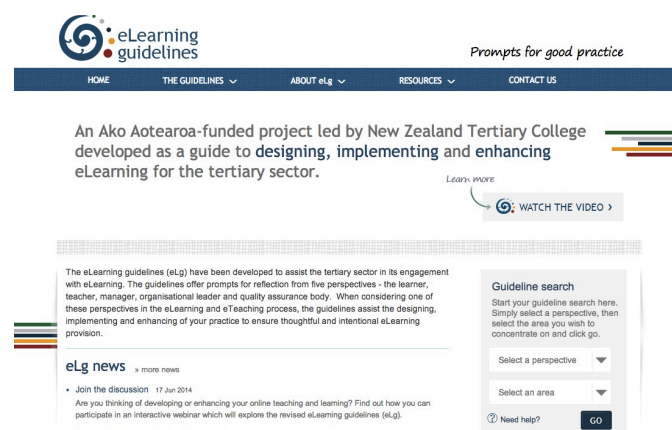

Figure 1: Screenshot of the eLg website

Together the eLg and the resources draw attention to underpinning principles of good practice in the design, delivery, assessment and evaluation of learning and teaching supported by technology. With the addition of the two new perspectives, they should also support the future proofing, expansion and sustainability of eLearning for tertiary organsations no matter where they find themselves on the development continuum.

Where to from here?

The next phase of development will involve the creation and maintenance of a vibrant community around the eLg. The Reference Group will morph into an eLg Advisory group tasked with expanding awareness of the site and sustaining the development and currency of the guidelines themselves. This will involve contributing to a communications initiative, submitting recent resource and reference material to populate the site and ensuring the value and currency of the material available.

The previous guidelines were embedded by case studies of implementation and a similar initiative will be undertaken again. Users will be invited to submit a description and evaluation of their application of the eLg in

their organisation for publication on the site. This will foster the showcasing of effective practice in eLearning and eTeaching, aligning rhetoric with reality, and providing a further baseline for critique.

To assist the process, a series of workshops is planned to support the application of the eLg and the investigative process for and with organisations along with further publications in the sector.

The provision of regular news items on the site will keep the eLg community informed, and invitations to submit case studies and other references should ensure the involvement of a wide range of contributors to the enhancement and currency of the resource for the entire tertiary sector. Together the community can work towards the establishment of quality provision of eLearning in organisations in the tertiary sector in New Zealand, and maybe beyond, bringing the rhetoric of eLearning more in line with the practice.

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