

# Developing a blended learning community at the University of Sydney: Broadening the comfort zone

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This paper reports on organisational initiatives undertaken at the University of Sydney as it continues to address the issues of coordinating information and communication technologies (ICT) in a devolved teaching and learning system. The thrust of the activities described in this paper are designed to make ICT in teaching and learning a ubiquitous part of the subject design and teaching process. This approach involves moving academics towards a blended learning community, broadening their traditional comfort zone through augmenting faculty academic management structures and providing a one stop website that coordinates all ICT support across the university.

**Keywords:** ICT, devolved systems, blended learning, benchmarking

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## Introduction

There is an understandable reluctance by academics already busy with teaching and research to make their tasks seemingly more complex or demanding. As a consequence academics may postpone introducing appropriate use of information and communication technologies into their subject design (Laurillard, 2002; Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002; Wood & George 2003). This reluctance may be further increased by not knowing what else is going on in their faculty or where to turn to for help (Burdett, 2003).

Without a coordinated approach to supporting the subject design with ICT appropriately across a university, students are the recipients of an experience shaped by the individual reluctance or willingness of academics. The result could be, for example, a rich ICT supported learning experience in first year, with learning communities and significant web resources, little or nothing in second year and something in between in the last year. Consequently, the overall impression upon graduation could reasonably be 'What happened to my web resources during my degree? Why was the support so uneven?'

One of the challenges in trying to address these concerns sustainably is related to the devolved nature of teaching and learning systems in some universities. A common characteristic of a devolved teaching and learning system is that considerable autonomy is handed to faculties in terms of the responsibility for teaching and learning, while the centre maintains a minimal role of coordination and guidance (Goody & Ingram, 2001; Ingram & Gilding 2002). The difficulty of this, however, is providing sustainable coordination in the face of faculties wishing to go in seemingly divergent directions.

Effectively meeting the needs of students requires a balance to be struck between support and coordination from the centre and the autonomy of faculties in matters related to teaching and learning within their discipline (Sheely, Veness & Rankine, 2001; Weaver, Button, & Gilding, 2002). This balance requires support to be offered at three levels; at the level of the individual academic, particularly new staff or novices in the use of ICT; at the level of the faculty or discipline; and at a cross institutional level. More importantly perhaps, is that a strategic balance requires continual coordination across all three levels to assist faculties develop a strategic overview of how they support their current offerings and future courses. A benefit from this three level approach to coordination is that it also encourages individual academics to better understand the context in which they are working, the resources at their

disposal and where their approach to using ICT in subject design fits into the broader teaching and learning goals of the faculty and the university (Ellis & Moore, in press).

This paper discusses two initiatives aimed at the broadening academics' comfort zones and developing and disseminating a more comprehensive picture of activities at a faculty and institutional level. The two initiatives are a Faculty ICT in Teaching and Learning Representative Scheme, which is just beginning, and a Teaching and Learning with ICT website, which is up and running. These initiatives are just two strategies that central academic development staff are adopting across the University of Sydney in order to help academics better integrate ICT into their subject design in a systematic manner. It is not expected that these two initiatives alone will address issues such as uneven support from a student perspective, but that they are a step towards helping faculties adopt a cohesive approach to subject and course design, even when there is not only considerable autonomy for faculties, but considerable autonomy for subject coordinators.

## Background

ICT in teaching and learning at the University of Sydney (USyd) is most commonly realised as e-learning and learning supported through video conferencing. Central support of the University e-learning system began in 2001 with the Flexible Online Learning Project (FOLP) using the WebCT learning management system and a systematic approach to learning through videoconferencing began in the Faculty of Medicine during the mid 1990s. E-learning has become an increasingly significant part of the student learning experience, with substantial growth of around 60% since 2001 (averaged across all faculties) in the use of the University learning management system to an institutional average of about a third of all subjects offered each year.

The pattern of ICT adoption in teaching and learning at the University is similar to patterns described in the literature (Rogers, 1995) with categories of early and late adopters evident. However support through projects such as the FOLP have encouraged many users in the early and late categories to move into e-learning more rapidly than might otherwise have been the case. Around 33% of learning at undergraduate level is blended learning, a combination of face to face classes with web supported activities and materials. In order to meet learning outcomes, students, must access activities and materials across a range of learning situations; attendance at face to face tutorials and lectures, participation in discussion boards, and interaction with online activities that contribute to a blended experience.

At the University academics generally develop their subjects autonomously within discipline groups. Each discipline sits within a faculty management structure, all comprising a Dean and heads of departments, some comprising Heads of Schools, some with a coordinator's role for Research, and almost all with an Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning. The role of the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning is a broad one, but currently one that does not focus specifically on ICT in teaching and learning. Within this management structure, faculty level responsibility for ICT is often overlooked. This faculty level awareness should include what is involved in successfully and sustainably integrating ICT into subject design, what works well from a student perspective and what are related issues when there are significant online components such as assessment and evaluation. There is a clear need to raise the profile of ICT within teaching and learning in the faculties.

In 2003, the Academic Board of the University reviewed the ICT needs of the faculties. This was part of a broader process in which the Academic Board reviewed the quality of teaching and learning in all the faculties. A key outcome of the review clarified that additional mechanisms to encourage communication and sharing of learning about ICT in teaching and learning across the university should be in place, and that such mechanisms should not only be tangible resources, but should be supported by an augmentation to faculty academic administration.

The need for change to be systematically and appropriately introduced across the University was acknowledged in the outcomes of the review. While such changes often lead to the inevitable creation of discomfort zones (Fullan, 1991) some discomfort is often necessary before approaches eventually fundamentally change. Changes of practice at an individual level are likely to be pointless without shifts in the overall context and ethos of an institution (Walker & Entwistle, 1999, p. 317), so the decision to

try to broaden the comfort zone included not only substantial resources provided through a website, but a fundamental change to the administration structure of faculties.

To inform USyd of standards in the ubiquitous use of ICT in subject development and teaching processes, a benchmarking relationship with the Open University (OU) United Kingdom, was established in 2001. The benchmarking activities since then have resulted in an exchange of documentation, visits and ideas (Ellis and Moore, in press). Despite significant differences in the mission and purpose of both universities, the benchmarking relationship has been beneficial. In terms of the strategies discussed in this paper, key activities at the Open University included their Faculty sub deans of production and presentation and their Course design, development and presentation Handbook.

The OU sub deans are faculty level representatives who are responsible for different aspects of ICT from their faculties perspectives. A key aspect of the role of the sub dean production is to negotiate on the behalf of faculty for resources for the development of learning materials, and, a key aspect of the role of the sub dean presentation is to negotiate with staff responsible for providing contact hours support for the OU subjects in their regions. The OU Course design, development and presentation Handbook is a website designed to clarify and articulate university support across the stages staff engage in when developing curriculum packages. It is written from the perspective of an academic wishing to draw on support in a cohesive manner, despite the resources being devolved throughout the university.

The faculty representatives and the Course Handbook at the OU were revealed to be two core aspects of the administration of ICT at the OU through the benchmarking activities (Ellis & Moore, *ibid*). As a result of the benchmarking relationship, the response at the University of Sydney involved the introduction of a Faculty ICT Representative Scheme and a Teaching and Learning with ICT website which together, provide a sustainable, supportive coordinated framework for development needs and teaching services across faculties.

## **Faculty ICT in teaching and learning representative scheme**

The Faculty ICT Representative Scheme at the University of Sydney is a strategy used to mitigate against the complexities brought about by a devolved teaching and learning system in which faculties exercise considerable autonomy in planning for teaching and learning. By having faculty representatives, who report to their Dean, involved in the planning of ICT plan for teaching and learning, the attention and interest of faculties is encouraged and supported. A number of Australian universities have used devolved networks as one of their strategies to support the use of ICTs and professional development generally in universities: see, for example, the CHED Associates Scheme at Monash University (Edwards, 1998); the Professional Engagement Model at Queensland University of Technology (Ryan, Hanrahan, & Duncan, 2000); and the Faculty *CATLyst* Scheme at the University of Western Australia (Ingram & Thompson, 2001). The Faculty *CATLyst* Scheme at the UWA is of particular interest as it is a network established and developed in a Go8 university and so faced similar challenges to those at USyd.

The Faculty ICT representative scheme and the Teaching and Learning with ICT website [1] were not being introduced into a vacuum. A range of successful initiatives currently exist across all USyd campuses to assist academics in the use of ICT in their teaching. These include e-learning workshops at beginner and intermediate levels, a regularly offered *3 day Principles and Practice* staff development program exploring the fundamentals of teaching and learning, a helpdesk for the institutional learning management system, videoconferencing support and more informal activities such as lunchtime gatherings available to all academics interested in ICT. The intention is to complement these types of activities with the new strategies.

Deans were asked to nominate individuals as their representatives so that the use of ICT in teaching and learning could fit into the existing academic processes in faculties. In addition to faculty representatives, representatives from other stakeholders in the teaching and learning area were included, such as; the office of the ProVice Chancellor Teaching and Learning, the Library, Information Systems, and the Institute for Teaching and Learning, helping to create a broader learning community.

To ensure that the faculty ICT representatives take on a leadership role for their faculties, their positions come with a number of responsibilities; they are the first point of contact for all ICT in teaching and

learning matters for their faculty, they report directly to the Dean, they act as an advocate for the faculty when central resources are available for strategic ICT projects and they use the knowledge and experience they receive through their position to help faculties more systematically plan for ICT projects in annual teaching and learning plans. It is expected over the next year or so that they will gradually develop an understanding of resource implications for ICT projects through their own experience and through the experience of other faculty ICT representatives. To help with the latter, a central working group has been set up.

To help the faculty ICT representatives learn about how other faculties are dealing with ICT issues, a central working group is being coordinated by the central teaching and learning support, the Institute for Teaching and Learning. The working group provides a context for the faculty ICT representatives to:

- § become aware of recent issues and policies relating to ICT in teaching and learning;
- § be supported in developing faculty based policies and initiatives, and good practice between the faculties;
- § develop and maintain a sustainable, research led and evidence based approach to the development of ICT in teaching and learning;
- § become aware of the wide range of ICT support across the institution; and
- § raise issues about the use of ICT in teaching and learning in a supportive forum.

In this way the representatives on the working group can view examples from other faculties of what works well online for learning and teaching and are able to use these examples when they develop strategies for their own faculty staff. The communication framework established during the regular meetings increases knowledge of how teaching and learning with ICT is being shared and assists in the development of a common language around ICT in teaching and learning. To help them in their role the representatives wanted a useful and sustainable framework they could point staff towards during the redevelopment of their subjects with ICT. This was one of the motivations behind the website. Another motivation arose out of benchmarking with the OU.

### Staff approaches to subject development

A key outcome of the benchmarking relationship between the USyd and the OU, involved the identification of a comparable process between the two universities. Broadly speaking, staff at both institutions went through similar stages when integrating ICT into subject design; deciding to develop or redevelop a subject with ICT, designing the experience, developing and trialing the materials and activities, teaching and learning using the materials and evaluating the student experience. This is not to say that all staff go explicitly through each stage, but rather in aggregate, these stages represent the scope of the activities in which staff might engage (Ellis & Moore, in press). Table 1 identifies the generalised development and teaching process.

**Table 1: Stages of the subject development and teaching process**

<i>Development</i>	Deciding to develop or redevelop a subject with ICT Designing Developing and Trialing
<i>Teaching</i>	Teaching and Learning Evaluating

While the stages are presented here in a fairly linear fashion, in reality there is considerable overlap, reiteration and revision as staff go back and forward between the stages, especially over semesters, to improve the subject. Using this process as a framework and to assist academics and the faculties to understand how support devolved across the institution could be utilised, a Teaching and Learning with ICT site was created to provide a sustainable, one stop shop for university wide coordination of ICT in teaching and learning.



illustrate the site, the first stage of Deciding to use ICT in teaching and learning represents how the site provides sustainable ICT resources, support and guidance for academics (see Figure 2).

The resources integrate ICT with the existing subject development processes. Academics in the Deciding stage can, for example, tap into current policy documents, find out who within their faculty can offer support, locate central and faculty resources, enrol in workshops, contact eLearning academics, conceptualise new ideas for their teaching, apply for a developmental site, engage with librarians, interact with information about sustainable teaching strategies, reflect on using problem based learning, or download a website evaluation form that can be used with their peers.

The final stage of the site deals with evaluation (see Figure 3). University of Sydney units are regularly evaluated on a three year cycle and academics are encouraged to complement this cycle with their own investigations into the effectiveness of student learning in their subjects.

Teaching & Learning with ICT Deciding

● Home ● Deciding ● Designing ● Developing ● Learning ● Evaluating ● Index ● Site Map

**Introduction**

One aspect of good teaching is understanding our students needs and the ways they learn. In thinking about an information and communication technology (ICT) innovation for your unit of study, the first thing to consider is whether or not technology will really support the students to achieve their learning outcomes. If you're not sure, the following helps you to canvass some options.

If you are just starting to develop online resources you might want to...

- find out what's going on in your faculty. You can do this by asking some of your [faculty ICT representative](#) or [faculty colleagues](#)
- find out what the technology does. You can do this by enrolling in the [workshops](#), or
- play around in a [development site](#) to get a feel for the online environment.
- have an introductory chat with [Learning staff](#)

If you already have some experience developing online resources, you might wish to align your innovation with one of your faculty [teaching and learning goals](#). For example;

- [creating a better 1st year experience](#), or
- [focusing on graduate attributes](#), or
- [implementing research-led teaching](#), or
- [internationalizing your unit](#).

To help you decide what to do, have a look at some of the people you could talk to and the resources you could access - [People](#), [Faculty](#), [Video Conferencing](#).

By the time you have finished deciding what to do, you should have

- thought about the innovation you want to introduce
- talked with colleagues in your Faculty
- accessed the available resources
- enrolled in the WebCT workshops (essential for ICT innovations)
- mapped out your preparation time
- read through any relevant policy documents
- looked at the rest of this website to get a feel for the stages in the development

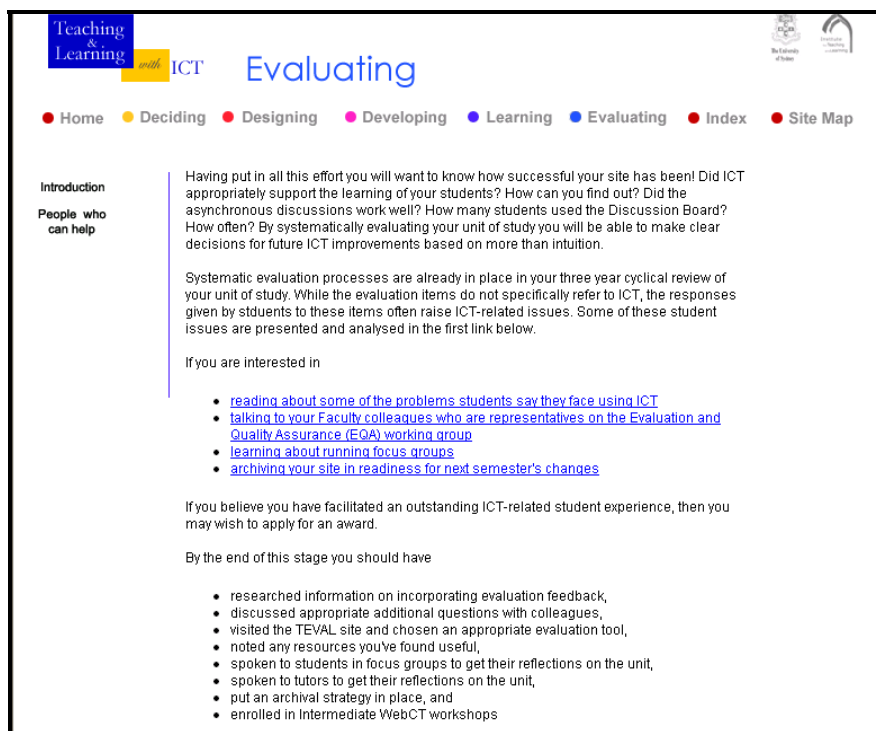
**Figure 2: Deciding screen from Teaching and Learning with ICT site**

<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/T&LICT/Deciding/default.php>

The first link on the Evaluation page presents solutions to reported problems students say they have experienced using ICT. Other evaluation resources relate to quality assurance, to using and interpreting the Student Course Experience Questionnaire, to the University's own evaluation tools and to the process of archiving the subject websites. In focusing on the student ratings of the use of technologies and aligning this to the evaluation of the learning objectives, academics and their faculties have a better chance of systematically integrating ICT into their subjects and eliminating the potentially uneven student learning experience.

### Evaluation issues related to the two initiatives

In considering how these initiatives should be evaluated a number of questions could be addressed, for example, how do these initiatives add to our understanding of what makes these networks effective, durable and sustainable? What decisions are being made about leadership and lines of communication and interaction within the University? How will the roles of faculty ICT representatives be negotiated? The following criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies were drawn from the benchmarking activities with the OU, from an understanding of faculty teaching and learning needs clarified through the Academic Board review in 2003 and, from broader literature in the area.



**Figure 3: Evaluation Screen highlighting outcomes based approach**  
<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/T&LICT/Evaluating/default.php>

With the ICT representative scheme just commencing, criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of it will initially include:

- § the establishment of academic administrative processes for ICT in teaching and learning in each faculty by the relevant representative;
- § an improved articulation of ICT goals in faculty teaching and learning plans;
- § an awareness of the resource implications of the ICT goals for the faculty;
- § an awareness of the communication strategies to implement the ICT goals for the faculty;
- § the development of guidelines for appropriate assessment strategies for the faculty; and
- § the development of guidelines for appropriate teaching strategies for the faculty.

These criteria cover the majority of quality assurance issues identified an internal review conducted the University's Academic Board in 2003. In addition, evaluation of the scheme will build upon the existing University framework of good practice in this area, for example, the communication management plan generated as an outcome of the group, will document the lines of communication and highlight interaction opportunities between stakeholders. Future research surrounding these initiatives will dovetail into the literature on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger and Snyder 2000).

As the Teaching and Learning with ICT site is at a more advanced stage of implementation, preliminary evaluations have already taken place. Feedback during the development phase and upon completion from internal stakeholders, have fallen into two broad categories; those analysing the meaning underpinning the web site structure and those identifying instructional design issues such as scrolling and the depth of the page hierarchy. In the former category, some responses seemed to suggest that making ICT goals attainable was part of a positive response to the site.

I was interested to view the site from the standpoint of organisational change sometimes being concerned that the razzamatazz about embracing ICTs places too much emphasis on tools rather than learning outcomes; however strolling through this site, my fears are allayed. The *visitor feels achievement is attainable* (while) at the same time, the primary concern about quality of learning has not been compromised. (User D)

It looks great, feels good to mosey about in, is written in a friendly style, *makes achievement sound attainable*, consistently follows sound pedagogical principles, and offers stacks of helpful tools and stimulating lines of inquiry. (User M)

This theme warrants further attention and perhaps research. It may be that a perception of unrealistic expectations from ICT is a key inhibitor to the ubiquitous inclusion of ICTs by academics in the subject design and teaching process and could contribute to their reluctance to broaden their traditional comfort zone.

There are plans for a further evaluation and research related to the site. These include understanding how academic conceptions of blended learning are related to the quality of their decisions and approaches to the design of their courses. This type of focus is part of the University's continuing ICT benchmarking activities with National Universities, such as the Australian National University. Data generated from this evaluation will be used to further embed the initiative into the ubiquitous approach to teaching and learning with ICT.

## Conclusion

As standards for the use of ICT in teaching and learning are a relatively new aspect of the teaching and learning system for devolved universities, their integration into the comfort zone of all academics are at their nascence. Developing a blended learning community not only requires a coordinated and sustainable framework, in this case the provision of the Teaching and Learning with ICT site, but willing stakeholders who are institutionally visible, in this case, the Faculty ICT Representatives in Teaching and Learning.

The faculty representatives provide the point of contact for academics and they provide visible leadership through important activities which can sometimes be overlooked, such as the dissemination of examples of what is working well. As they report to Deans (who have the authority to help shape the strategic direction of the faculty) they will also be able to raise awareness at a faculty level of how ICT can be used to most usefully support the student experience in the different disciplines.

The coordinating framework, the Teaching and Learning with ICT site, demonstrates simply and sustainably how ICT can be integrated into typical subject development processes which are supported across the whole institution. It is the combination of the two initiatives that has already begun to raise the profile of ICT in subject design as a ubiquitous part of academic life. If the site had been developed without a complementary strategy such as the Faculty ICT representative scheme, its integration into faculty processes would have been likely to be serendipitous at best. Together the authors believe that the initiatives complement each other. Their contribution to the dissemination of ICT in the subject development and teaching process will continue to be assessed in terms of how they provide coherence to the use of ICT resources in the student learning experience.

## Endnote

1. <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/T&LICT/>

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