A voyage out of the comfort zone: Colonising *Planet Online*

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Information and communication technology for use in the higher education arena has been progressively introduced in recent years. While some academics have actively welcomed this additional layer of teaching and learning opportunity, others have been more reluctant to incorporate this new dimension into their practice. We all know it can be threatening to be asked to move out of our 'comfort zone', and for some academics this comfort zone has been their familiar but traditional teaching methods. This paper reports on one approach to staff development that was used both to expose low users to the added educational value that can be gained by skilful use of technology and to develop the knowledge and skills needed to realise the potentials offered by technology. The approach, structured around a science fiction theme, involved a journey of discovery to Planet Online.

Keywords: staff development, educational change, online learning communities, information and communication technologies, WebCT

Introduction

It could be interpreted that the theme of this conference suggests that academics are comfortable with information and communication technology (ICT), are competent in its use, and are familiar with the developing theory and practice in the emerging discipline of online teaching and learning. This may be true of those who are ready and willing to explore the frontiers, evidenced by their own online teaching innovations, their contributions to research in the field or their connection with organisations such as ASCILITE. It can be argued that there are others who are still trying to find their place in this comfort zone, and those who still resist being there at all. For this latter group, ICT does not feature in their particular comfort zone. As some of us move on to explore further frontiers, what should we be doing to encourage others to come with us?

What can we surmise about academics and the comfort zone?

There are factors that influence the adoption of online technology as a means of transforming the ways in which university courses are presented. One fundamental barrier, identified by Garrison & Anderson (2000), is a natural resistance for universities, and hence academic staff, to change their culture and traditions. We also know that change is as inevitable as death and taxes: we can either be proactive and help to drive it or we can resist it, but we cannot ignore it. Change is manageable … so why is it taking so long for some academics to manage the change to online learning? Since there is a core of experienced online learning practitioners, and established theory and practice from which to draw, why do we still see academics lacking engagement with online learning? While time and workload constraints are frequently cited as reasons for lack of engagement, these may not be the true barriers; it is always possible to find time for something that we *want* to do. Wilson & Stacey (2003), in examining the context whereby only some staff enthusiastically embrace new technology and pedagogy, imply that there are twin barriers to be overcome. They suggest that dealing with the uncertainty about how online technology works and concerns about how it impacts on teaching and learning may be the key to unlocking the door that lets academics move out of their comfort zones. What follows is a staff development project undertaken at the authors' campus which sought to address concerns about technology and pedagogy and to help some move more purposefully into the online teaching and learning medium.

Beyond the comfort zone

The Faculty of Rural Management at Orange has a long history of early adoption of innovative teaching practice which has been primarily stimulated through its distance education endeavours. The earliest attempts at Orange at increasing engagement with students using ICT occurred in 1996 when an email tutorial assistance program was mounted seeking to increase engagement between students at a distance with their lecturers to achieve some academic and social aims associated with building learning communities (Morgan and Tam, 1996). Encouraging results led to the subsequent acquisition and use of the learning management tool *WebCT* in 1999. While there was extensive support offered and considerable encouragement given to all academic staff to build online strategies into their teaching practice, by the end of 2003 the situation was one where its usage varied considerably. There were some staff who used it extensively, using many of its learning support tools, and they encouraged interactivity through the asynchronous discussion board. Others tended to limit the use of online learning strategies; some used it mainly for administrative purposes, such as advising students of grades. A faculty wide policy had been implemented whereby a minimum level of *WebCT* usage was required for all distance education units and several staff did no more in their use of the technology than was sufficient to comply with the prescribed minimum requirements. While it was this latter group that was of particular concern in terms of staff development, there was also concern that many staff who were making more use of online learning were unaware of some useful approaches to more fully benefit from its potential.

Despite sporadic attempts to build awareness and interest through occasional seminar presentations and short internal papers, there had always been quite heavy reliance on the Faculty's online learning coordinator and educational development staff to facilitate the utilisation of ICT and to manage *WebCT* technological issues. There was little evidence that this approach had contributed significantly to the uptake of ICT in teaching. Rather, it appeared that it was largely the early adopters and innovators who seemed to benefit the most from this. Generally, learning how to teach online was done pretty much 'on the run' by academic staff, independently of one another, with no forum to come together to compare notes and explore pedagogical issues.

It was into this background and a frustration that the uptake had not been as rapid as expected that in December 2003 *WebCT Campus edition V4* was released in the Faculty. This release provided an opportunity for a training session to be carried out for interested staff to learn more about the essentials of the new version. It also provided an opportunity to address some of the concerns that had been analysed as discussed above. It was agreed to plan a staff development activity that would address the twin barriers of technology and pedagogy by using interactive workshops that would employ online technology. It was seen as important to stimulate interest and curiosity well in advance of the workshops to ensure good attendance.

Planet Online: Preflight planning

The concept of *Planet Online* was devised as a means of capturing interest and provoking academic staff to commit to attend two separate 4 hour workshops over consecutive days in February 2004. Staff received personal invitations to join Captain Kirk (the Dean of the Faculty) and the crew (Scotty and Spock, aka online learning coordinator and workshop leader) of the Starship Orange on a voyage into cyberspace to explore the Planet Online. The voyage comprised 2 stages:

Exploration phase 1:

- the meaning of online learning
- changing student profiles and expectations
- technology versus pedagogy
- emerging theory and practice in online learning
- why we cannot avoid it
- charting a course
- engaging students and building knowledge through forum discussions.

Exploration phase 2:

- planning a program - what tools to use
- what other voyagers have done or are doing
- strategies for the full colonisation of Planet Online.

All academic staff were invited to the workshops, and 62% attended, representing staff across the whole spectrum of online expertise. Intending voyagers received a survival kit, which they needed to bring to the first session. It contained short extracts from current texts about online learning theory and practice which would support the issues for discussion in Phase 1, and also a paper authored by experienced online learning practitioners at another institution. This paper formed the basis of asynchronous forum discussions, led by experienced online moderators, during Phase 1 of the workshops.

A Planet Online *WebCT* site was set up by the online learning coordinator, and it was designed to maintain the theme of starship exploration. The *WebCT* site homepage displayed a starship hurtling through space, and a series of icons providing links to various tools that would be used in the workshops, and which could be subsequently revisited.

Planet Online: The voyage

Day 1: The first part of Phase 1 was spent putting online learning into perspective and examining emerging theory and practices, particularly in relation to the interactivity provided via asynchronous forum discussions. The models devised by Salmon (2000) and Garrison and Anderson (2003) were introduced as frameworks for understanding how the discussions can work. The session also proposed practical steps for developing greater use of *WebCT* in participants' units of study. For the second part of Phase 1, academic staff were split into three groups, becoming online students and participating in interactive asynchronous forum discussions, using the paper provided in their survival kit as the topic of discussion. Groups were led by 'flight leaders' who had been invited to contribute because of their experience of moderating forum discussions; group members did not have access to other groups. In each case the designated flight leader posted a starter question for their group. A problem with this design which had not been anticipated then became apparent as all group members responded in the group forum almost at once. Rather than the activity reflecting the characteristics of an asynchronous online forum, it was more akin to that of a synchronous chat session with many chatting at the same time. The enthusiasm of the participants with their rapid and unrelenting postings caused moderators difficulties as they were somewhat overwhelmed in their attempts to direct and manage the discussion. No sooner had they begun to compose an appropriate response to postings than a new series from participants would appear on the screen.

Day 2: At the start of the session the groups were opened up for access by all participants, so that they were able to spend some time analysing what happened in groups other than their own. This led to considerable workshop discussion about what it had felt like to be online students; what had worked or not worked in the groups, culminating in a brainstorming session about what it takes to be an effective online moderator. There was recognition that the problems encountered by the moderators on the previous day were not likely to occur in the longer timeframes usual in asynchronous discussions. The remainder of the session (Phase 2) was devoted to exploring some online units of study which used various *WebCT* tools, such as quizzes, to open up some 'show and tell' discussion, and to consider ideas for future online directions at the Faculty.

Planet Online: Back to base

The Planet Online *WebCT* site remained open after the voyage was over. Workshop participants were asked to post up their feedback about the workshops, and discussion threads were opened so that discussions about aspects of online learning, and further direction to useful references could be posted. There was some activity in the site after the workshops were completed, but most feedback was received verbally rather than online. Feedback indicated that most staff found that the workshop had given them fresh ideas about the role of online learning in the units they taught and a greater appreciation of how to manage online asynchronous forum discussions.

Placing strong focus on moderation of the asynchronous forum discussions has resulted in noticeably changed use of *WebCT*, with more academic staff now using them in their units. The workshops provided a way of finding out where current levels of comfort with online teaching and learning were situated. They were useful in dispelling myths, reducing fears about the technology, identifying the support staff needed to progress, and determining what form future staff development should take. It was clear that many staff still needed to develop confidence in setting up and managing their units on *WebCT*, and a series of short sessions have subsequently been run to address these issues. The online learning coordinator now actively encourages staff to do more for themselves, and provides individual assistance when requested.

All indications are that this was a particularly useful staff development activity for the Faculty. Overall, academic staff are now more aware of how they can make better use of this aspect of educational technology in their teaching and better understand that *WebCT* for them should be more about the educational design of online learning spaces rather than technical programming issues. This heightened awareness seems to have dispelled some fears and reluctance to move beyond the current comfort zone for some staff who had previously made only minimal use of the technology. For some others it has renewed their enthusiasm as they have now been exposed to strategies of which they had been unaware, and that they can use to improve the learning experience of their students.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to online learning coordinator Sally Brownlow for her assistance with this project and the leadership she provided to the *Planet Online* activity.

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