

# Professional development for professional developers: Who's learning about e-learning from whom?

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This paper examines the critically reflective approach of a group of academic support staff in the design, development and evaluation of an e-learning resource. The resource was a showcase of examples of electronic learning and teaching approaches developed at Monash University titled Designing Electronic Learning and Teaching Approaches (DELTA). This paper does not focus on the resource itself, but rather on the critically reflective approach used, which drew on the features of participatory action research and was extended to include a participatory component in the evaluation of the site so that the outcomes of this process could be formally accommodated in data collection. The paper explores this critically reflective approach as a model for e-learning developers to monitor and progress their own professional development, engaging in collaborative dialogue to enhance their professional practice.

Keywords: teaching and learning strategies, educational paradigms, research methods and approaches, learning communities/collaborative learning, personalised learning

## Introduction

As universities adopt new technologies to support teaching and learning, staff development for pedagogically appropriate use of these technologies becomes imperative. Epper and Bates (2001, p. xv) describe staff development and training as a 'daunting challenge', and others (Bates, 2005; Kulski, Boase-Jelinek & Pedalina, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Shephard, 2004; Wilson & Stacey, 2004) have repeatedly brought attention to the need for professional development in the area.

Teaching academics benefit from support to translate their teaching into non-linear, flexible, collaborative, e-supported environments and to gain confidence in using the technology. Educational designers and staff developers can help teaching academics to reconceptualise what they do and to use technology effectively. In recognition of such a need, an exemplars *WebCT* site titled Designing Electronic Learning and Teaching Approaches (DELTA) was developed by a team of academic support staff involved in educational design and academic professional development at Monash University, Australia. DELTA demonstrates good practices in e-learning by showcasing examples of and ideas for learning and teaching with technology. DELTA was presented within *WebCT Vista* (the University's learning management system) to support the time-poor teaching academic, facilitating broader, flexible and 'on demand' academic staff development opportunities as part of a strategy to develop a University-wide suite of online and offline support opportunities to complement *WebCT* training. The principles that guided this approach to staff development included iterative development of strategies for learning and teaching with technology, reflective practice, mentoring in the area of new skills development, learning from demonstrations by colleagues, and cross-faculty sharing and exposure. For further details about the design and evaluation of DELTA see Samarawickrema, Benson and Weaver (2005).

This paper explores the experiences of the six members of the academic support group involved in the design, development and evaluation of DELTA, in the context of participatory action research. It focuses on the critically reflective approach which was adopted, examining it as a model for professional

development of academic support staff working in areas of innovation and e-learning where formal professional development programs are few. The individual and collective reflections of the group, articulated through dialogue, contributed to the professional development of the group members themselves. While the conversational framework developed by Laurillard (2002) provides one way for conceptualising this experience, the emphasis on the empowering aspects of participant collaboration embedded in the concept of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) offers a further dimension for exploring the implications of participation for professional development.

## Professional development and participatory action research

The use of action research as a model for staff development in higher education is not new (Kember & Gow, 1992; Grundy, 1995). Webb (1996, p.59) noted a decade ago that 'Apart from phenomenography, action research is perhaps the most influential and almost certainly the fastest-growing orientation towards staff development at the present time.' Action research is particularly applicable to staff development because it supports critically reflective thinking about one's own practice, is grounded in the principles of teamwork and collaboration to forge new meanings from experience, and offers a clear framework for acting on these (Brookfield, 1995; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Although its roots in the critical theory paradigm (with ideas of change through emancipation and empowerment) may seem far removed from the context of a small e-learning development team, Brookfield (1995), among others, has highlighted the relevance of critical pedagogy in understanding our roles in education. He refers to critical reflection as an 'illumination of power' (p.9): it allows us to understand how power frames and distorts our educational processes and interactions and to question our assumptions and practices that are taken for granted as being good for our teaching, while participation provides an avenue for making our thinking public. Other benefits include its support for taking informed actions, developing a rationale for practice, avoiding self-blame, emotionally grounding us, enlivening our classrooms, and increasing democratic trust. Action learning principles have been acknowledged as important in professional development for e-learning (Ellis & Phelps, 2000), and there has been some recognition of the advantages of action research for professional development in this area (McPherson & Nunes, 2004), but there appears to be scope for wider application of these ideas and practices.

It became clear from the early stages of the design and development of DELTA that the conversations we engaged in as we expressed our design and development priorities, or debated the merits or otherwise of particular examples for inclusion, were exposing our pedagogical values, extending our thinking and creating shared ownership of the decisions made. Hence, in the tradition of Freire (1972), it was evident that we were demonstrating how '*humans in communication are engaged actively in the making and exchange of meanings, it is not merely about the transmission of messages*' (Evans & Nation, 1989, p.37). We realised that our dialogue was a vehicle for our own professional development as well as offering clear directions for action. Consequently, when planning the evaluation of the site, it seemed obvious that one component should involve a participatory process to facilitate the formal collection of our own critical reflections in order to include these, alongside data from other sources, to inform its ongoing development.

## Implementing the participatory evaluation process

In extending the concept of participatory action research to participatory evaluation we were acknowledging the close links between these two forms of enquiry (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Jackson & Kassam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Participatory evaluation as a 'formal, reflective process [people undertake] for their own development and empowerment' (Patton, 2002; p.183), provided us with a way of documenting our individual and collective perceptions of the site, as a means of reaching consensus on priorities emerging from the evaluation. While participatory evaluation is frequently applied in a community development context, our use of it at a micro level appeared appropriate to the team-based nature of our work, allowing us to move from individual reflection, to identification of areas of consensus through dialogue, and then to prioritisation of the actions to follow. The process we used was as follows:

- 1 Collectively identify aspects of the DELTA site for evaluation.
- 2 Individually write a 200 word response to each of the (five) aspects identified, summarising each response in one or two sentences.
- 3 Compile, circulate and reflect individually on the compiled responses.

- 4 Meet in a focus group facilitated by a critical friend to identify consensus items.
- 5 List separately the consensus and non-consensus items and prioritise the former for action.

This participatory evaluation process exposed the values of individual members of the group in a non-threatening way, allowing for a merging and reconceptualising of shared understandings. It also provided for group ownership of the priorities for action, thus simultaneously supporting both the evaluation and professional development of the team members. Results from the above process included consensus on the characteristics of good examples and the process of selecting them. For example, we agreed that examples should be realistic, achievable, exploit the unique capacities of the technology, establish the learning context, demonstrate good pedagogy, engage learners and address their needs, and be identified by intuitive titles. Consequently, we validated the existing examples as well as confirming the selection process for future examples. On the overall site design, we shared the view that the ability to browse from different user perspectives was needed, and improved search capabilities, which led to refining those design features. There was also consensus that as a resource for academic professional development, DELTA's use varied according to user needs (confirmed through other evaluation strategies), and that the process of selecting examples was indeed a professional development activity in itself. Considering the evaluation questions collaboratively reinforced a shared accountability in the changes we made to DELTA and the value of learning from each other by developing and refining our individual ideas about e-learning.

## Discussion and conclusion

The process described above illustrates how participatory evaluation provided a form of data collection that allowed our own merged understandings to be considered alongside data from other respondents through other evaluation strategies to improve the site. It helped formalise a process which we had recognised as an informal participatory action research cycle during the dialogue which underpinned DELTA's design and development. By formalising, documenting and managing the participatory evaluation process, we not only owned our individual contributions but also consented to the way in which these activities were carried out, thus taking ownership of the process as a whole. From ownership comes empowerment, a powerful motive for change. Brookfield (1995) notes that changes that occur from participatory action methods consequently generate personal or life change for participants. In our case, undertaking such an approach as part of the evaluation meant we could take responsibility for our own quality monitoring of DELTA and its ongoing development as a key outcome, providing an implementation method to allow action to follow.

The team-based nature of e-learning development lends itself to participatory action research as a model for professional development, particularly given the volatile state of emerging knowledge in the area, its contextualised nature, and limited formal professional development opportunities. The context of developing a professional development resource for others, out of the experiences of others, offers the potential of an ever widening circle of participation with new understandings emerging through reflection and dialogue. Consequently, in relation to our own professional development, as experienced through the participatory evaluation process outlined above, the answer to the question 'who's learning about e-learning from whom?' is, to some extent, that we are learning from each other. However, the processes of participatory action research and participatory evaluation take the learning to another level: the sharing of knowledge and values results in the making of new meaning so that rather than learning *from* someone, we are learning together, sharing experiences, drawing from and contributing to an existing knowledge base that benefits the wider e-learning community.

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