

Strategic Staff Development for Embedding E-Learning Practices in HE

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INTRODUCTION

The increase in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in Higher Education over the last decade has been significant, both in enabling distance learning and supporting on-campus teaching and learning. For institutions to keep a place in the market, they have been obliged to harness technological opportunities to fulfill their strategic mission and student expectations.

In responding to the call for innovation, particularly alluring in the e-learning arena, we can become guilty of failing to embed what has already been found to be successful in developing teaching and learning. We fall into the trap of "project" frenzy, always moving to the next strategic priority or technological facility before evaluating the extent to which the previous development was effective and worthwhile. It is also important to consider what influences staff engagement and participation in teaching developments in order to shift practices at a rate that is appropriate for a department or institution.

The staff development implications for e-learning innovation are addressed by Fox & Hermann (2000): "teachers are [...] reluctant to take up the challenges to use the new online media. Some have deep-rooted concerns about changes in work practices, and others see the huge gap between the rhetoric surrounding technology and the realities of educational settings, while others boldly embrace new media with seemingly little critical pedagogical concern."

Promoting e-learning can be straightforward if staff developers consult widely and 'go with the grain' of their own institution, working to support specific educational objectives or specific technologies in which lecturers are known to be interested (Dempster & Blackmore, 2002). However, embedding e-learning practices is not a simple process. Whilst the usability of the IT infrastructure and tools should match against these educational objectives (Dempster, 2002), engaging staff to make educationally sound changes to their teaching requires a genuine understanding of curriculum development and change management. For technology is not pedagogically neutral. It can enhance and sustain dominant practices such as lecturing, or it can disrupt and transform them (Garrison & Andersen, 2000). It can offer different ways of teaching and learning that require exploration and reflection of pedagogy and technology as an integrated approach that must work effectively together.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR SUPPORTING E-LEARNING

HE institutions and their teaching and learning centres have taken a number of different approaches to embedding e-learning into academic practice. Large-scale introduction of networked learning has been particularly driven by the availability of commercial packages (VLEs: virtual learning environments) and developing understanding of the wider MLE (Managed Learning Environment). Some approaches have taken a specific learning and teaching initiative as a focus (such as widening participation, research-based learning). Some rely on a small number of champion innovators to inspire others to take up new practices, whilst others have built upon developments within nationally funded projects. A number of institutions have sophisticated e-strategies and e-learning development units that service the requirements and demands of academic clients. There is no single, clearly successful, approach to take that ensures that e-learning practices will become embedded. The right model is the one that works for each specific institution. The issue of transferability of innovative approaches and developing the capacity to respond to innovation and change remains a key area. The "operational context" of embedding in each institution appears to be crucial to the choice of tactics that are likely to lead to success. Understanding this and reflecting on one's own structures, processes and support approaches is one role for the strategic staff developer.

What is clear is that approaching technology in teaching and learning as somehow different to other teaching and learning is divisive, differentiating ICT-based developments from 'normal' practices. E-learning practices can develop in isolation from other teaching practices. E-learning development must be, first and foremost, educationally sound. That is not to say the IT infrastructure and technical expertise dependencies can be underestimated, but simply that progress is often held back not by infrastructure constraints but by issues like motivation, skills and staffing. The same institutional mechanisms and incentives that reward teaching, such as promotion, recognition of teaching excellence and accreditation can also reward e-learning development.

In introducing technology into teaching and learning, Wills & Alexander (2000) highlight five factors that must be closely integrated if the process is to be successful: strategy, structure, management processes, roles and skills, and the nature of technology itself. To achieve this integration, organisation and management structures may need to be change or at least work across traditional divides. Institutions, however, review their overall structures and practices infrequently, preferring to maintain as far as possible familiar operational frameworks. As a result, staff developers aim to bind the concerns of pedagogy, economy, technology and administration within structures that do directly support this.

A broad institution-wide approach is often to create a unit of specialists with complementary skills and understanding who are tasked with e-learning development. While fragmenting of e-learning support provision may resolve political or technical challenges, it is often counter-productive. It appears to suggest that e-learning is somehow different from other learning and potentially lead to approaches that are technology-driven rather than pedagogically-led.

MODELS FOR DEVELOPING E-LEARNING PRACTICE

The variety of institutional structures and the complexities of engaging staff has resulted in equally diverse approaches to developing practice.

FORMALLY ACCREDITED COURSES

A drive for professionalism and the establishment of a national Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE has led many institutions to develop accredited teaching development programmes. Embedding the use of ICT is often expedited through programmes of professional development for academic and related staff (Beetham & Bailey, 2002). Whether accreditation provides an effective incentive for lecturers varies between institutions and individuals (Smith & Oliver, 2000). It has, however, proved a useful way to engage staff who would otherwise be unwilling to committing time to adopting e-learning practices.

INSTITUTIONAL WORKSHOPS

An informal programme of workshops can link pedagogical and technical issues as the focus for staff development and provide a means for "just-in-time" training and support. Staff develop through undertaking a development project, but also through peer learning from the opportunities offered in the programme to share and discuss their concerns, needs and approaches as a group. This also provides the staff developer with a focus group for looking at how specific e-learning tools can generate innovative teaching and learning ideas.

STAFF SECONDMENTS AND LEARNING TECHNOLOGISTS

An increasingly common form of educational development involves seconding academic staff from across an institution to work on projects agreed with (and often funded through) central units (e.g. Elton, 1995). This recognises 'embedding' as a transformative process in developing new practices. Such an approach is also a central part of the role of an intermediary group of staff, the 'learning technologists' (Oliver, 2002). The role comes with a wide variety of titles and status in different institutions and these individuals may work at institutional or at departmental levels. What they have in common is that their practice centres on collaborative and situated curriculum development, providing opportunities for them to contribute to development (both practical and educational) at both staff and policy level.

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

It is important to recognise that staff are constantly learning as a result of the practices they engage in; this takes place irrespective of whether they are being formally instructed or supported (Billett, 2002). One might argue that this process does not always lead to good practice as staff may take part in a 'hidden curriculum' that deviates from any broad strategic direction. This can perpetuate inappropriate short-cuts and misinterpretations just as easily as it can pass on intuitive knowledge (Billett, 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

To embed e-learning practices effectively, strategic change is required. Practices change constantly, but without 'joined-up' technical and pedagogic support alongside an appropriate reward scheme, this change will be undirected or even misdirected. All too often, staff development remains politically weak (often positioned purely as a service) whilst a complex web of interests (and self-interests) makes e-learning high-profile by separating it from other activities, thus making responsibility for its policies and support problematic. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that such diverse forms of support have developed.

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