Effective Change Management Strategies for Embedding Online Learning within Higher Education and Enabling the Effective Continuing Professional Development of its Academic Staff

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ABSTRACT

Previous research studies show that those universities wishing to successfully engage in online learning will have to adopt and implement tactics that have the capacity to overcome existing social and cultural constraints. An inclusive, consultative framework needs to be established, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been recognized as a key concern that should be addressed here. The moves towards non-traditional forms of course delivery for students require a well prepared CPD programme designed to enable academics to acquire pedagogical skills within a technology enhanced arena. Successful programmes of CPD are those that acknowledge staff wants interests, hopes and varying amounts of availability. For induction into online teaching, an effective model could be one that adopts accessible and suitably blended approaches which acknowledge different learning styles and sound pedagogical theories and practices. To succeed beyond this stage—and taking into account the pace of change, the lack of development time and indeed the general lack of staff developers—there is a need for an even greater range of on-going scalable, just-in-time and formal/informal CPD opportunities.

The conclusion drawn is that if the concerns of academic staff are acknowledged and their needs appreciated then online learning initiatives—most importantly backed up by appropriate range of scalable CPD opportunities—have a far greater chance of successfully gaining widespread support.

Keywords: Online learning, eLearning, change management, university strategies, Continuing Professional Development, academics.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has become a critical factor in "determining security, prosperity, and quality of life, the global nature of our society, [and] the ease with which information technology....enables the rapid exchange of information, and networking….." (Duderstadt, p. 220, 2000). Universities, as engines of knowledge, have an obvious and crucial role to play here relating to staff, students and their wider environment. In the UK, higher education is now charged by government with attracting greater numbers of students. However, at the same time as this expansion is taking place, the running costs of higher education have grown alongside a relative decline in monies being received from government sources and increased demands made for greater accountability for the sums that have been allocated (Dearlove, 2002).

In this context, UK universities are being encouraged to be more entrepreneurial and innovative in their activities and less reliant on public funding; they are being urged to adopt the very technology that has brought about the explosion of the knowledge economy to deliver and support learning flexibly and cost-effectively.

ADVANCING ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR AN ONLINE LEARNING STRATEGY

Those universities wishing to successfully engage in this process will have to adopt and implement tactics that have the capacity to overcome existing social and cultural constraints (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Taylor, 2003). Significant investment in the delivery and support of courses by new learning technologies is not going to lead to major savings unless strategic transformation occurs within institutions at the same time (joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group, 2003). However, the movement to virtual delivery systems challenges a deeply institutionalised feature of higher education (viz. the "private" domain of the lecture room) and the professional skills that have been developed and practiced there (Jaffee, 1998). Pedagogical practices at the traditional intersection of time and space will no longer hold (Jarvis, 2001). Learning will be increasingly initiated and be within the hands of the student rather than the teacher – who will become more of a facilitator and much less of a "sculptor" (Ljoså, 1998).

A clear vision should be in place at the most senior level(s) so that staff can gain understanding of why change is important and necessary (Edmonds, 1999; Betts, 1998; Oliver & Dempster, 2002). Bates (1999), Dearlove (2002), Fullan (1991), Gilbert (2001b), McPherson (2003), Panan & McGovern (2003), Spencer-Mathews (2001) and Welsh & Metcalf (2003) all in fact conclude that the successful implementation of any plans will ultimately rest on academics agreeing that the proposals are reasonable. The institution has to turn itself, through its underlying philosophy and operational practices, into very much a learning organization and get commitment at all levels (McPherson, 2003). It is unfortunately all too easy, as Duke (2002, p. 136) suggests, for senior management to become a "closed, self-referencing system" trying to impose changes that struggle to establish out any long-lasting roots. Rogers (1995) believes that an innovation can be much more successfully diffused within an organisation using appropriate communication channels (i.e. interpersonal exchanges, change agents, opinion leaders rather than distanced, formalised recommendations handed down from on high). The principal/president/vice-chancellor, senior managers and centrally placed educational development staff therefore need to be talented change agents creating credibility, sustaining movement, diagnosing any problems, providing information and working across traditional boundaries (Bates, 1999; Bower, 2001; McLoughlin, 2000). They really do have to understand the situation from an academic's perspective (Surry, 2000). The latter researcher advocates the adoption of Keller's ARCS motivational model. This theory states that a topic which grabs a practitioner's attention, appears relevant to their needs, makes them feel confident that they can master it and which provides a certain satisfaction in doing so has a greater chance of successful implementation than one which does not contain these features. As such, it reinforces Rogers' theory (1995) that change will not be adopted by all at the same time and that a variety of strategies should be called upon to suit the different levels of predisposition to change (or "innovativeness") amongst the academic staff.

Successive studies have clearly shown that academics are inhibited from getting involved with flexible learning initiatives. Clay (1999), Butler & Sellbom (2002), Hanson (2003), Kirkpatrick (2001), Lee (2001), McKenzie et al. (2000), Millheim (2001), Newton (2003), Spotts (1999), Williams (2002) variously ascribe this reluctance to deficiencies in equipment and facilities to tackle new approaches; current poor technical and administrative support; a lack of perceived time; the pressure of research activities; feelings that it might lower quality of courses; a less than positive attitude of peers; a lack of official recognition for work with new technologies; intellectual property rights and ownership of materials produced; a general resistance to management-imposed approaches; as well as a scarcity of appropriate CPD. Bennett & Marsh (2002) also observe that, compared to the long history of didactic approaches, there is also presently not the same quantity of research evidence and personal experience to draw from to substantiate views as to the value of online learning as a mainstream activity. Indeed, academics may right from the start be unconvinced about the real motives for institutional involvement in such an initiative, holding a belief that the real drivers are

entrepreneurial rather than intellectual (Lynch & Collins, 2001). And the wisdom of this route is anyway questioned by Wiles & Core (2002) who point out that those models that exist for costing online learning do not support the view that using technology is affordable and can encourage expansion. Mistakenly believing in such propositions, they believe, threatens the central need to ensure quality standards in teaching and learning.

Resistance to change is therefore likely to be overcome if: these and the previous issues can be adequately addressed; academic staff are fully involved/have full ownership in the design, development and carrying out of these changes; they have to be an understanding of their new roles; and the results eventually produced are truly ascertainable (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Hagner, 2001; Latchem, 2004; Lewis, 1998; Reushle, 2000; Rockwell et al., 2000). The drive towards a mass education system has already disturbed some academics in older research bound universities who now feel that they have far less control than previously over their working lives (Dearlove, 2002); and, if they are to change their teaching practices, they need to feel that the effort that they put into responding in a positive fashion is appreciated and that their other commitments will not suffer (Hanson, 2003). Of particular importance to the success of any initiative will be backing it receives from what Rogers (1995) classifies as the mainstream early and late majority innovator adopters, who normally make up 68% of the total staff. Academics just cannot be expected to embrace new learning initiatives merely because of verbal encouragement (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000) or through the "build it and they will come" approach (Bower, 2001). Plewes & Issroff (2002) and McPherson (2003) also reveal that subject discipline influences feelings towards, and the adoption of new learning technologies. The attitudes of matching external professional bodies appear to have some additional effect on academics as well (Traxler, 2004).One acknowledged way of instituting an inclusive, consultative framework could be achieved through the establishment of a central working group or "Teaching, Learning and Technology Roundtable" (Ehrman, 2002; Latchem & Hanna, 2001). Its purpose would be to maintain dialogue between the main stakeholders: senior and middle management, the academic innovators, the perhaps often more reserved mainstream academics, academic support units and the student body. The roundtable would in turn link up with existing committees and networks across the institution to ensure that online developments move forward in close harmony with other academic visions and endeavours (Milheim, 2001). In addition, Jarvis (2001) feels that such bodies should borrow from the practices of corporate universities and usefully seek input from local organisations and businesses with which the institution has dealings.

The roundtable would offer an excellent opportunity to address various visions (institutional, departmental and personal) for online learning, ensuring at a general level that SWOT[1] breakdowns are in place for discussion and dissemination, and that issues of total quality management and adequate resourcing are not compromised. It would also in particular examine policies and procedures regarding the concerns already mentioned above, including CPD. Indeed, without appropriate CPD an institution's schemes for online education are not going to progress beyond a pilot stage (Salmon, 2000). It is, as Taylor (2003) describes it, "the catalyst which allows the evolutionary process to move forward less catastrophically…" (p. 75). Indeed, if a move towards online learning is to be seen as strategically important, then policies and practices regarding CPD have to be a leading area of concern (Taylor, 2003; Maguire, 2005) and one that should be co-ordinated by senior body – such as this roundtable.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Although improvements have been made of late, all too often in the past CPD has had a rather unimportant status (Lewis, 1998; HESDA, 2002). Inglis et al (pp 107-108, 1999) observe that academic staff have been traditionally appointed for their subject expertise

rather than any proficiency in the areas of pedagogical design and information and communications technology (ICT). The moves towards non-traditional forms of course delivery for students now however put the emphasis on pedagogical techniques within a technology enhanced arena and call for a well prepared CPD programme to be established to offer support here (Ellis & Phelps, 2000). Until recently though, ICT had had only a modest impact on teaching in and learning within UK higher education; and most universities have seemingly offered little training regarding this or pedagogical skills for those seeking involvement with open and online learning. This has left academic staff inadequately skilled in the potential of these approaches (Sandberg et al., 2001; Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group, 2003).

Research quoted by Newton (2003) and the study undertaken by Lee (2001) emphasise the direct relationship between the CPD support provided to staff and their motivation and commitment (Rockwell et al., 2000; Mckenzie, 1991; Jaffee, 1998). It is therefore very important that staff wants, interests and hopes for CPD are accommodated here. Academic staff development opportunities should be offered at various levels of expertise, most especially for those academics who have not been previously involved with flexible learning initiatives (Shannon & Doube, 2004). Nevertheless, designing and providing effective, high quality CPD is still quite a challenge. A problem, as Friedman et al. (2002) discovered, is that it is often difficult to get academics to participate in CPD. In the light of circumstances referred to in the previous paragraph, they may be often unfamiliar with the character of new learning technologies and therefore unable to pinpoint their support needs (Johnston & McCormack, 1996; Fox, 1999). Academic staff can also easily be put off by the nature of the experience. Where CPD workshops for online learning existed in the past they were often delivered in a face-to-face, teacher-directed fashion (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000), providing only a second hand experience of online technology through a limited learning style (Deepwell & Syson, 1999; Kolbo & Turnage, 2002). Buckley (2002) concludes that the drawback of most traditional CPD workshops is that they seek to convert with little affective involvement. His comments are echoed by Battersby (1999) who observes such sessions too often fail to empower and emancipate professionals.

What is more, a lack of time to attend formalised CPD has been shown to be a seriously inhibiting factor in the take-up of CPD (Felton and Evans, 2002). It is often a problem for academic staff to undertake CPD when only full-blown/traditionally delivered courses are available (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). Indeed, those individuals needing most help may at best only be able to do so on a discontinuous basis because they carry such a heavy teaching load (Kolbo & Turnage, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Shephard et al, 2004). Then there are the part-time or contract staff, who need to earn a livelihood and who just cannot necessarily afford to give up working hours or bear the additional costs of participating. Yet the number of people in these two latter categories has grown significantly in recent years (Barrington, 1999) and their needs are still not being adequately addressed (HESDA, 2002). It is vitally important that no one here is just left to "muddle through" (Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group, 2003) and some more practical and flexible provision needs to be considered and put in place.

INDUCTION: A BLENDED CPD APPROACH

A greater understanding of the way that online learning can be incorporated into curricular provision for on- and off-campus students can possibly be attained through the creation of suitably "blended" CPD courses that can incorporate both theoretical and practical concepts and which can be more easily accessed by the intended audience (Winograd, 2000; Bennett & Marsh, 2002). If these characteristic are to the fore, then those enrolled will have an even greater appreciation of online learning and be more actively involved than would have been the case if the course had taken place within just one format (Littlejohn, 2002). In essence, such an approach should ideally incorporate a "scaffolding" process whereby course members begin in a reassuringly familiar face-to-face setting. There then follows a period of teaching observation within a CPD online

classroom to be followed by a lengthier phase of online teaching practice within an actual programme. Such periods of online immersion, where trainee tutors are working all together or in small groups within socially interactive and reflective learning environments can provide a 'real life' understanding of online learning roles and clarify implicit methodologies – with learning preferences/styles further accommodated through the provision of both self-paced print-based and online instructional materials (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Macpherson, 1997; Shephard et al, 2004; Taylor, 2003).

Rhodes et al. (2000) stress though that ultimately the success of any such course will be highly dependent on participants experiencing a sound underpinning of web-based pedagogy at all stages of his/her progress. This would be best achieved through the incorporation of constructivist pedagogical practices (Buckley, 2002), including Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" conjecture (1978) – where increased understanding will occur when working in close collaboration with more capable and competent colleagues – and Bandura's "Social Learning Theory" (1977) – where a positive experience of social interaction will reinforce the desire to adopt this behaviour subsequently. Its authentic nature also fits in very well with the Situated Learning school of thought based around the studies of Lave, Wenger and others (Herrington and Oliver, 1995). It further allows for the implementation of an experiential learning cycle (or spiral) within which an adult develops as a result of their own understanding (Kolb, 1984). Chism (2004) suggests that in the case of ongoing professional development, an understanding of such a cycle, how academic staff develop as facilitators and the environmental support needed at various stages can lead to more effective long-term change. While Bennett et al. (1999) successfully offered their colleagues a short online course in a completely different field of study by way of inducting them into online teaching and learning, many other researchers feel that such programmes should concentrate on teaching and learning within participants' subject or work-related contexts so as to build on their present teaching activity and culture (Oliver & Dempster, 2002; Laurillard, 2002; Spotts, 1999; Moran & Myringer, 1999; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Biggs, 1999). Such an approach was, for example, very well addressed through one online professional development course that faced participants with critical issues affecting the life at a fictitious university (McKenzie & Staley, 2000). This exercise not only offered a realistic experience but also moreover provided them with a model to use when they were developing and delivering their own subject based online courses.

FURTHER SCALABLE CPD OPPORTUNITIES

Academic staff have a lot to remember when moving into the online field and it is often rapidly forgotten if not utilised immediately (Felton and Evans, 2002). This is a drawback to formalised CPD provision and background support for practitioners. The pace of change also now often means that space for the development of online curricular provision is getting even shorter (Shomaker, 1998). What is more, there is often a lack of well skilled staff developers with experience and understanding of both traditional and online learning and competent to facilitate formal CPD sessions in these areas (Moran & Myringer, 1999). Consequently, in addition to the instructional designs touched on earlier a rolling strand of even more innovative, scalable and staff-centred support is called for. Some universities have, for instance, reformed their educational development units into flexible/online learning advisory centres with drop-in facilities (O'Hagan, 2003). Another approach has been to offer this and a wider, accessible range of academic support services online (Donovan & Macklin, 1998). Cravener (1999), Engeldinger & Love (1998), Oliver & Dempster (2002) and Collis & Moonen (2001) also advance the notion of just-in-time CPD through a more general 1:1 face-to-face development strategy. Within the latter proposal, expert colleagues would be used as trainers, with academics receiving assistance on their own familiar equipment, when it is convenient, in their own offices, and building up confidence through development styled to suit their needs. It is a high cost approach but the value of such individual assistance would also lie, for example, in enabling staff development to extend a safety net to part-time staff who might access the facility by means of a call centre. Such a provision could deal not just with the traditional

"help desk" technical enquiries but also with advice on online learning issues (Hitch & MacBrayne, 2003). Indeed, Gilbert (2001a) feels that even if this facility was initially just wanted for aid with basic applications (e.g. word processing) certain barriers would have been lowered; and enquiries might then more easily made about alternative (technology assisted) teaching approaches. Special attention must, however, to be paid to the character and disposition of anyone selected for such a crucial front-of-house/interpersonal role (Deepwell & Syson, 1999). Involvement in professional development can be additionally supplemented and empowered on a day-to-day group basis through the establishment and development of communities of best practice (Fullan, 1991) whether online, face-to-face, long- or short-life, course, team, departmental or cross-institutional. These communities offer a way of overcoming the older more isolationist tendencies of academic life to allow the creation of a collaborative approach to working and an often more enjoyable, continuing form of CPD (Bowskill et al., 2000; Littlejohn, 2002). They benefit from being underpinned by the same robust constructivist thinking referred to earlier, offering a non-threatening collaborative space where discussion, reflection and understanding can occur amongst colleagues. In doing so, they can address real and immediate requirements, focussing in on the matters that academic staff need to address, unravelling the resources to be accessed while accommodating the different learning styles of those involved (Gilbert 2001b; Irani, 2001; Clay, 1999; Engeldinger & Love, 1998; Gold, 2001).

Indeed, D'Antoni (2003) observes that they are a very effective way of developing skills in the preparation of high quality distance learning resources. If the concern is in fact one of curriculum development, it will be even better if instructional designers are attached to these groups (Taylor, 2003; Edwards et al., 2000). Alternatively, early adopters of online learning from amongst the academic staff can once more play a role in CPD and be appointed as advisers to less experienced colleagues (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Cravener, 1999; Engeldinger & Love, 1998; Hanrahan et al., 2001; Oliver & Dempster, 2002). If in fact organised online, these communities can yet again offer a direct experience of virtual learning and promote characteristics of effective use (Butler, 2001; Milligan, 1998; Spratt et al., 2000; Ellis & Phelps, 2000), effectively channelling sound theoretical approaches into everyday good practices. However, although they should largely be self-managing there is a need for some sympathetic oversight. Bennett et al. (1999) found for instance that if left to their own devices communities of this nature can often be taken over and focus on the needs of rather more experienced practitioners, failing to act as a vehicle for widespread change.

Finally, other scaleable support ideas that encourage reflection on practice and consequences are mentioned by Couvillon et al. (2002), Frayer (1999), Kent (2003), Surry (2000) and Latchem (2004). They variously include: personalised online help pages; informal one hour lunch workshops; newsletters; listservs; teaching with technology presentations by already experienced practitioners; live teleconferenced link-ups to outside expertise; equipment upgrades; summer schools, book study groups that compile selected readings about online teaching and learning; accredited awards; teaching fellowships; sabbaticals, secondments, exchanges and shadowing; action research projects; induction sessions on the institution's online strategy, policies, procedures and available support for all newly appointed staff; and financial assistance to attend conferences.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous research studies have revealed that, in the development and implementation of an effective online teaching and learning strategy existing academic staff concerns need to be acknowledged by management and channels found for these to have a real input. Indeed, if staff efforts are truly appreciated, then there are a number of practical issues that they would like to see satisfactorily addressed. It is suggested that a co-ordinating body representative of all the main stakeholders is established to take on board such

matters, including the vitally important one of CPD. Indeed, a deeper and sustained learning experience for students can only be made available if academic staff can become familiar with the pedagogical skills and ICT expertise needed here through a systematic, pro-active and accessible professional development programme. Any induction process should allow staff to undertake a learning curve that builds up their confidence and expertise using a blended learning approach incorporating constructivist principles. Alongside this, there are a plethora of further scalable opportunities that can be arranged and made available to ensure that curricular initiatives and the necessary skills to hone these continue to be supported as effectively as possible at grassroots level.

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