Having your cake and eating it too: The rhetoric and reality of redesigning staff professional development

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Despite significant change in higher education, the structure of professional development for academic staff has remained largely unchanged, consisting primarily of workshops and other forms of face-to-face development. While this is the accepted and often demanded mode of delivery, workshop-based programs are resource-heavy and often unsustainable.

Until 2012, the central support unit at the University of New England had been offering a traditional program based on workshops. While the program attracted positive reviews, it was becoming increasingly apparent that there were significant issues in the structure that could no longer be ignored. An alternative, innovative solution was sought, which would allow far more flexibility and scalability while improving the experience and outcomes of professional development.

This paper outlines the design of a new program according to the above rhetoric, and then examines the reality of analytics and participant experience data to draw conclusions about the success and viability of such a redesign.

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Introduction

The Learning Innovations Hub (LIH) at the University of New England (UNE) is tasked with offering a professional development program for teaching staff. Prior to 2012, the program offered was almost exclusively face-to-face workshops, as this was both the expected service model and the cultural norm. Faced with significant staffing issues following a restructure, though, it became apparent that this type of development program was not sustainable nor having the desired levels of impact, and a complete redesign of the program was raised as a way forward.

However, often when a redesign is called for, expensive and time-consuming methods are often employed - large-scale review, procurement of software, engagement of external consultants, grant applications and so on. In this situation, an efficient and innovative solution was sought, whereby redesign could be completed quickly and implemented via inexpensive tools that were easily available. As Ward (2014) points out, "the most successful [projects] tend to deliver top-shelf stuff with a skeleton crew, a shoestring budget, and a cannonball schedule". This correlates with Sivers' (2011) catchcry of "start now, no funding required".

This paper will outline the driving factors taken into account during the redesign, the process and resulting products, and the reality of participant experience following implementation.

Rhetoric

While there is a decent amount of literature on the effectiveness of workshops as a professional development medium and their impact on teaching practice, 'effectiveness' and 'impact' cannot be the only factors in determining the success and sustainability of a program. Practical factors such as time investment, scalability and convenience should also be considered and a holistic view of the development program as a whole should be taken.

As an educator it is impossible to ignore the current drive to shift teaching away from didactic models of practice to more student-focused deep-learning practices. As Guskey (1999) notes, continuing to offer more of the same old development can result in reduced outcomes. Smyth (2003) points out that "an academic staff development programme... should not be driven from a didactic (controlling) conception" (p. 57). While by definition a workshop is not truly didactic in the way that a lecture is, often workshops are still a presentation with additional discussion or activities.

Altbach et al (2009) states "The Internet has … touched virtually all dimensions of the higher education

enterprise" (p. xviii) - one might add 'except for internal professional development' as a caveat. The paper goes on to note that in the future, "the academic profession will become more internationally oriented and mobile, [and] the activities and roles of the academic profession will be more diversified" (p. 3). There would seem to be a considerable opportunity lost by not leveraging the benefits of the internet in the delivery of more flexible professional development programs.

Given the above, the following is an outline of the factors that the researchers identified as being problematic in the traditional workshop program.

Issues with traditional professional development programs

Reliance on time and place
Academic staff have huge demands on their time. There is little free time available to attend professional development activities, and meetings and face-to-face teaching make it difficult to attend events. Workshop attendance is generally low which provides limited opportunities to collaborate with peers.

Large amounts of content condensed into one period of time
Workshop-style professional development means that a large volume of content is presented in one sitting, usually with only the handwritten notes of the participant as lasting artefacts. Information retention in this situation is a challenge, and subsequent requests for assistance due to forgotten content is common. Crumley (2011) notes that "retention of content...a few months after the course ended was shown to be only slightly higher than that of a control group that had never taken the course".

Disconnect from teaching practice
Teaching staff are bombarded daily with a need for "21st century technology-enhanced" learning models, lest MOOCs and other trends render them irrelevant (Palmer, 2012; Johnson et al, 2014). Experiencing professional development in a face-to-face low-technology environment creates a 'do as I say, not as I do' situation in which the method of delivery they are experiencing is completely disconnected from the methods of delivery they are expected to use in their own teaching.

Closed/siloed environment
It is common practice for professional development to be delivered only within one institution, with courses and resources not available outside the institution. McGill (2013) lists a host of benefits to the provision of open educational resources (OERs), including collaboration, enhanced reputation and enhanced sustainability, that cannot be leveraged when professional development is offered only within an institution.

Accessibility
The traditional workshop model strongly favours permanent academic staff, who are physically located on campus and paid for their time to attend. A fully open, online development program goes some way towards servicing what Bryson (2004) refers to as the most neglected, invisible group - casual and sessional staff.

Two solutions - webinars and Coffeecourses

Faced with the above issues, the first action proposed was to move the development program completely online. This was a simple yet significant move that immediately allowed several of the issues outlined above to be addressed. The authors then took two different approaches to designing an online development program, which sit side by side to create a very flexible program for staff.

Webinars
The webinar series runs via Adobe Connect virtual classroom software. Each weekly session is a blend of presentation, discussion and either self-directed or collaborative activity. The series promotes teaching and learning practices in a similar context to teaching staff. It was designed to utilise the technology available to staff and demonstrate how it could be used to engage with students, allowing staff to experience the virtual environment as participants and to gain insight into the capabilities of this medium.

Coffeecourses
Coffeecourses are a series of self-directed short online courses built in Wordpress. Content is chunked into very small sections that take approximately 10 minutes to complete (the premise is that each section could be completed over a cup of coffee, whenever there is time in their schedule). Benefits of this structure include

discoverability (via tag and category metadata), openness (not restricted to an institutional login) and contextual interactivity as comment threads are available on each post.

Reality

Having been redesigned, the professional development program has now run for approximately two years. In that time analytical data has been collected regarding access and participation, and a participant survey conducted to determine the perceptions and experiences of those participating.

Analytics

Coffeecourses
Since April 2012, the Coffeecourses site analytics show the following:

- 6,584 page views;
- 114 comments on various course posts;
- 108 registrations (70 internal, 38 external);
- 21 different institutions (including students, industry professionals and K12/TVET educators); and
- 4 different countries.

This demonstrates that the goals of broadening access, increasing participation and breaking down the silo effect were effectively achieved. Additionally, informal observations indicated high levels of sharing of course content and the site conceptually as a whole via social media. The application of a creative commons license to the site also enabled other institutions to adopt the Coffeecourses idea into their own online program. While reputational effects were not considered in the redesign, they cannot be ignored as a benefit.

Webinars
In 2013, the webinar series had 116 unique internal participants (21% of staff - total academic staff in 2013 was 543) and many attended multiple times. Each webinar was recorded and in 2013 there were 3452 overall views of recordings.

While no comparison data regarding previous F2F workshop participant numbers is available, these figures demonstrate that the webinar series had good staff penetration rates and also effectively achieved the goals of increased accessibility and a reduction of the reliance on space and time.

Survey data

A retrospective survey of participants was conducted to determine their preferences and experiences with the redesigned development program. Response levels were lower than anticipated (n=36), with most responses coming from internal staff members.

The majority preference of participants was for face-to-face (F2F) workshops (42%) - a not unanticipated outcome. F2F workshops were also the majority response for having the most impact on teaching practice (also 42%). 'Good learning environment' and 'suits my learning needs' were the top two traits attributed to F2F workshops (58% and 68% respectively). By contrast, webinars and Coffeecourses were only moderately (30-40%) ranked as a 'good learning environment' and 'suits my learning needs (37% for webinars, 24% for Coffeecourses).

It is interesting to note the disparity in perceptions of development staff and participants regarding the learning environment and suitability to learning needs of F2F workshops. In the 'rhetoric' section it was noted that issues (disconnect from teaching practice, content retention) had been observed by the researchers, but this was not reflected in the experience data from participants.

However, for both webinars and Coffeecourses, 'convenient' was the dominant characteristic attributed to them (67% and 59% respectively), with 'flexible' and 'more accessible' following closely at over 50%. This demonstrates that the goals of improving accessibility and flexibility were achieved with the redesign.

Perceived positive impact on work was the main point of difference between webinars and Coffeecourses. Webinars received a significantly higher rating of being 'beneficial to my work' - 66% agreed or strongly agreed, vs 32% agreed/strongly agreed for Coffeecourses. Insufficient data was collected to determine why this

was the case so assumptions cannot be drawn on whether this was due to content, format or some other factor. It does, however, indicate where staff preferences will likely lie when determining demand for the future.

Interestingly, 'online teaching' was by far the item most often ranked as 'important' in a matrix of possible future development topics. If we extrapolate from the data, it seems that the preference of most is *not* to learn about online teaching *via* online teaching.

Conclusion and future actions

It is tricky to draw conclusions about the success of the program redesign, given that defining "success" depends on the criteria chosen. If we examine the initial goals and issues to be solved in the redesign, then the redesign can certainly be considered to have been a success as these goals were largely achieved. If, however, impact on practice and staff perceptions are taken as indicators of success, the answer becomes far less clear-cut.

It is clear that a dichotomy exists between the rhetoric and the reality of professional development design. On one hand, a model designed entirely in response to demand from staff is resource-heavy, difficult to sustain and difficult to maintain relevancy in an ever-changing climate - as Johnson et al (2014) note: "perhaps the most wicked challenge... is keeping education relevant" (p. 21). On the other hand, however, a model designed in response to the demand for innovative, practical solutions runs the risk of scoring low on staff satisfaction and efficacy, whether perceived or actual. How, then, are central support units to go about cutting the balance between the two? There are obvious benefits to implementing alternative online programs, as demonstrated in this paper, but there is also a need to service staff needs and preferences.

At this stage there is no clear way forward. Given that the response to the changing landscape of higher education is a far more pressing concern in student-facing education than professional development, it is likely that we will continue to see slow change and blended models of development offered well into the future.

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