Learning how to e-teach? Staff perspectives on formal and informal professional development activity

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This paper reports on the findings drawn from a New Zealand research project (Professional Development in e-Learning PDeL) which is producing a sector-wide framework for professional development in tertiary e-Learning. The findings indicate that staff engaged in e-learning in tertiary institutions are not making use of the formal professional development opportunities available to them. Rather they seem to gain their knowledge and support from a variety of informal means. This is despite an emphasis on the provision of formal professional development opportunities by both the New Zealand government and institutions themselves. The conclusion drawn from the findings is that institutional approaches to e-Learning professional development do not yet fully reflect the demands and constraints that working in a digital context impose.

Background to e-learning in New Zealand

The increasing importance of e-learning within the New Zealand tertiary sector throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s prompted New Zealand's Ministry of Education to explore issues related to the development of e-learning in the tertiary sector. The establishment of a working party and their *Highways and Pathways* report (Butterfield et al., 2002) highlighted the need to invest in the development of human resource capability in e-learning. Since then, a number of government initiatives have arisen to assist in the support and facilitation of increased professional capability in e-learning across New Zealand's tertiary sector. A key consideration underpinning government funded initiatives and policy documents have been on achieving a coherent and consistent approach to e-learning across the tertiary sector. The *Tertiary Education Strategy (2007-2012)* states that Tertiary Education Organisations should have in place systems and structures that ensure educators "continually update their knowledge of their subject and of effective learning" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p18).

Marshall's (2005) survey of e-learning maturity across New Zealand tertiary institutions demonstrated that teaching staff capability 'was easily the worst for the sector of any process assessed' (2005, p96) with staff development being largely informal and ad hoc. Informal professional development has been defined by Swartz and Bryan (1998) as "learning by association and affiliation" (23) these are activities undertaken that increase knowledge in a particular area but which are not formally acknowledged, compared with formal PD programmes which often have an assessment or attendance requirement in order to obtain credit. Hegarty et. al's (2005) study of staff development models in New Zealand suggested self efficacy of staff was more likely to be linked to informal approaches to developing capability . This paper focuses on staff experiences of formal and informal professional development related to e-learning in tertiary institutions.

About the project

The aim of the Professional Development and e-Learning (PDeL) research was the development of a framework that would enable tertiary education organisations to formulate and consult with staff about their e-learning needs, to explore factors influencing e-learning capabilities, and to consider the implementation and embedding requirements for adoption of and continuous improvement in professional development (PD) for e-learning. The research was funded by NZ Ministry of Education, and the framework was jointly developed with a team from Otago University (Shephard et. al, 2008). The insights derived from the research were used to develop a set of guiding principles for individuals and institutions to assist them in identifying PD needs, finding incentives, providing opportunities, achieving engagement and evaluating the success of e-learning PD initiatives. In working toward this goal the research uncovered a number of critical issues that the participating tertiary institutions faced in relation to the provision and uptake of formal and informal e-learning professional development opportunities. This

paper focuses on two key issues: that of teacher engagement with e-learning and the institutional factors influencing engagement and capability improvement in e-learning.

The research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods. An invitation to complete a quantitative survey hosted on (http://www.surveymonkey.com/) was sent by email to every individual in two New Zealand universities and three polytechnics in May and June of 2007. The survey involved 27 non-compulsory questions (multiple-response, Likert scale, multiple-choice and open ended questions). Questionnaire topics covered institutional and personal beliefs about professional development, the type of PD staff engaged in, engagement and non-engagement in e-learning and the effectiveness of PDel. Survey responses were anonymous but staff could volunteer for an interview.

The second phase of the research consisted of 40 phone and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between September and December 2007. All participants who volunteered from the survey were interviewed and additional respondents were approached to ensure staff with a managerial role and those not involved, or recently involved in e-learning were also included. Ten staff were managers of academic or support programmes, with two of these being Heads of Schools. Four staff were employed in supporting staff or student e-learning rather than in teaching *per se*. The bulk of participants were female (n=27). Participant interviews were transcribed in full and coded using a conceptual mapping technique. The technique consists of identifying and coding key themes in the participants' texts, by developing descriptive and analytic categories and sub-categories of meaning which emerge from the participant's own narratives. This produced a participant-centred view of e-learning and the social and institutional context in which it is embedded.

Staff engagement with e-learning PD

Just over half of the on-line survey respondents were involved in using e-learning in teaching (52.5%) with 23.5% involved in supporting e-learning. The majority of those involved in e-learning were doing so because 'e-learning allowed them to do things they couldn't do using other methods' suggesting they could see the benefits of engagement. The vast majority (95.6%) of survey respondents' strongly believed in the importance of professional development. In addition, 74% of staff believed that their institution viewed professional development as important. There was also a high level of awareness of e-learning PD courses available in institutions (71 %), but only 53% of respondents had engaged in some form of formal or informal professional development for e-learning. The gap between expressed attitudes about the importance of professional development and actual engagement suggested that e-learning PD was not viewed as an intrinsic component of ones 'professional' work, a factor confirmed in interviews.

Informal professional development was the most common form of professional development engaged in. This type of PD compromised of activities such as sharing knowledge with colleagues, spontaneous learning arising from work or personal activities and acquiring knowledge through browsing websites or 'surfing the net. Less than 40% of staff engaged in e-learning had participated in formal professional development that incorporated both pedagogical and technical elements of e-learning. Informal professional development was rated as more effective than institutionally run professional development courses. PD activities classified as least effective included two of the most frequently engaged in formal PD activities: 'attending e-learning events at my institution' and 'technical training courses run by my institution'.

Though there was considerable variation between staff in their professional development and e-learning experiences, some clear themes emerged in the analysis of the interviews. New and/or reluctant users most often expressed anxieties and fears, but were generally positive after initial experiences in using e-learning, with many gaining confidence through applying what they had learnt in introductory courses in e-learning. More confident users expressed the desire for advanced and specialised courses and problem and issue based learning. It was these staff who most often desired formal PD that related to the pedagogy of e-learning, but who were largely engaged in informal PD. Most staff noted how a growing e-learning competency enabled them to develop a vision for where they might want to take their teaching. This confidence enabled staff to ask questions about new e-learning possibilities, tools and technologies, and to recognise what skills or tools might be needed in order for them to improve their teaching capability. All but the most experienced staff stated they wanted readily available 'just-in-time' assistance. Early innovators tended to be the most independent and self-directed in their PD activity. They expressed high levels of confidence in their e-learning and teaching capabilities and were often involved in providing informal PD for others.

The interviews confirmed the survey findings that the bulk of e-learning PD is informal, usually occurring through collegial help, self tuition and online exploration. PD opportunities occurred spontaneously or in an ad hoc manner (such as talking with colleagues, or being helped by another staff member to overcome challenges) or were immediately accessible via the internet, the library, and online communities. Staff were unable to state why informal activities were seen as effective, but had much to say about what had worked well for them. A commonly stated reason for why informal PD worked well was the establishment and maintenance of social relationships with others. These relationships provided staff with an environment where they felt free to ask questions, where they knew assistance would be forthcoming and where there was continuity in teaching-learning relationship. Staff also expressed a preference for working one-on-one with e-learning staff or in small groups within their institution.

Though much of PD learning is informal, staff expressed the need for formal and institutional structures that would effectively support them in their own professional learning and in the delivery and support of e-learning for students. A number of participants spoke highly of the personalised and enthusiastic help they had received through e-learning professional developers. Many staff, however, wanted better access to exemplars and examples of good practice, professional development which combines on-line teaching practice and educational theory, individualised assistance from enthusiastic staff, and assistance based on disciplinary expertise.

Institutional factors influencing capability and engagement

Understanding engagement in formal and informal PDeL necessitates an examination of institutional and contextual factors. Some of the most telling findings came from the online survey where groups of staff identified why they had not engaged in e-learning professional development, and in the interviews where staff identified the constraints and barriers that impacted on their engagement with e-learning and associated professional development. Negative attitudes and assumptions about e-learning (and e-learning PD) included the view that it was an alternative to face-to-face teaching and the perception that e-learning lacked the educational benefit for time invested. Ultimately these views saw e-learning PD treated as an optional rather than an integral part of a staff member's teaching and learning activities.

The most significant constraint on engagement with any type of e-learning professional development was time. For many of the interviewed staff high workloads and a perceived lack of time often lead to surface approaches to e-learning professional development. A common characteristic of this surface approach was the belief that learning how to work certain online tools was more important or useful than engaging in learning that would assist them in becoming a better eTeacher. Of particular significance was what respondents identified as the prioritisation of support and rewards in relation to research versus teaching. Personal motivation was a key driver for undertaking e-learning PD and while intrinsic motivations are important for building capability and self efficacy (Hegarty et al. 2005) many staff argued there were no institutional incentives for engagement. Consequently decisions to engage in PD were related strongly to both individual and institutional prioritisation of workplace tasks. In instances where direct-line managers supported and actively encouraged e-learning and e-learning PD staff felt there was an incentive for them to engage.

Within institutions infrastructure, policy and social connections were often poorly linked causing both confusion and frustration for staff. If e-learning policies existed they were not clearly articulated for teachers, nor were policies aligned with practice, with implementation unevenly experienced and/or hampered by institutional structures, unsupportive management, resource conflicts and/or disciplinary, organisational barriers. This was particularly evident where IT and professional development units were poorly integrated. Such divisions could reinforce a technological-pedagogical division of e-learning, whereby teaching staff may regard an introduction to e-learning as a course in ICTs rather than an effort to change or improve their teaching abilities (Donnelly and O'Rourke, 2007).

Implications for PD policy and practice

The findings of the PDeL research are consistent with Mitchell et al.'s (2005) suggestion that there can not be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to any professional development programme, and that it must accommodate a diversity of skills, attitudes and learning styles. The majority of interview participants believed e-learning and the associated PD were not simply about improving technological capability, but about learning about pedagogy and the application of e-learning in one's teaching and disciplinary context. Yet they felt their involvement in formal PD often did not provide this. Informal forms of professional development are both popular and seen as effective. While staff could say 'what worked' they were less articulate about why and even less so when probed about how effectiveness could be

assessed. There is a danger therefore that e-learning PD will be driven by action rather than by a substantial knowledge base about what works and why (Lawless and Pellegrino, 2007).

Whilst it is encouraging for institutions that their staff value professional development, and are engaging in it because of a belief of its benefits, it is necessary to consider the implications of the emphasis and value placed by staff on informal professional development. As Goodyear (2006) suggests time invested in e-learning is only sustainable if it brings returns over and above the initial time investment. Although informal professional development is seen as an effective means for staff to up-skill and it accounts for the vast majority of their learning, the nature of it is such that it is difficult to ascertain what exactly has been learnt. Whilst similar criticisms related to learning transfer can be levelled at formal professional development programmes, there is the ability with formal professional development to control what is being presented in the learning experience. This control increases the likelihood of staff being exposed to important aspects of e-learning such as pedagogy, versus just the technical aspects of the field. Nevertheless given the significance and expressed effectiveness of informal forms of professional development, ways in which these learning opportunities and their positive attributes can be capitalised on should be considered. For example, facilitation could include encouraging those involved in e-learning to meet face–to-face or on-line to discuss and demonstrate their teaching experiences and courses, providing online self-help material, facilitating mentoring relations and developing communities of interest or practice (Hegarty et al., 2005).

Ham's (2005, p69) study of ICT clusters in schools concluded that "the interplay among the various variables that might combine to produce an 'effective' PD programme in ICT is complex and for the most part irreducible to a singular form of best practice". The PDeL study confirms that institutional philosophy, politics, learning culture and social and financial support within the organisation are all factors influencing uptake and implementation of PD for e-learning (see also Wang and Wang, 2004, Cheong et al. 2006) and that policy and practice should be aligned. The imaginings, assumption and experiences of perspectives of managers, training and support staff and teachers are also powerful components of e-learning capabilities and must be acknowledged in attempting to create structures and relationships which are conducive to building e-learning capability (Hannon, 2008, Kidney, 2004). It seems then, that in terms of professional development policy and practice the challenge of assisting teaching staff in their e-learning journeys remains: institutional approaches to e-Learning professional development do not yet fully reflect the demands and constraints that working in a digital context impose.

Acknowledgements

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