

Switching them on and keeping them on: Online professional development for university teachers



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This poster describes the design and structure of an online professional development course in e-learning for university teachers. It presents the nature of the course and identifies some of the problems and issues of trying to switch academic staff on to professional development in the area of e-learning based on the experiences within a diverse, multi-campus university community. The intention is to convey some of the key principles required when designing an engaging and sustainable professional development programme, which promotes personal skills at the same time as seeding longer-term pedagogical change.

Key words: e-learning, professional development, pedagogy

Introduction

In the 10 years that Massey University has had a Learning Management System (LMS) the accompanying professional development has changed considerably. E-Learning professional development has had to evolve to meet the changing demands and priorities of staff brought about by considerable changes in the University's structure. The most recent and profound evolution has been the move toward a pedagogical driven, totally online professional development programme. Since the programme went online in 2005 staff enrolments have increased, there has been an improvement in the quality of e-learning, and staff are now interested in e-learning as a means of enhancing their learning and teaching activities. Whilst the outcomes are positive it has taken close to three years to find the right mix that not only 'switches academic staff on' but keeps them interested, enthusiastic and open to the pedagogical possibilities of quality e-learning.

Features of the program

The most obvious feature of this programme is that it is held totally online in the University's supported Learning Management System. This allows the LMS's tools to be showcased in a manner that mirrors best practice, as well as letting staff experience what it is like to be an online learner, which is something over 90% of all participants have never been. Other features include:

- A focus on the non-technical use of e-Learning tools
- A design that encourages sharing of experiences and problem solving
- Opportunities to dispel myths and inaccuracies regarding e-learning
- A flexible and customised programme
- Compulsory activities focused on best practice e-learning
- A design that can be easily replicated by all participants
- Allows for all levels of e-learning experience and expertise
- Feedback is encouraged and is incorporated into a continuous improvement programme

Key challenges

e-learning is often regarded as an 'add-on' to normal teaching and learning activities. One of the challenges of the programme was to change this mindset so as to encourage staff to think of their e-learning endeavours as being an integrated part of their learning and teaching. Another major challenge was staffs' overwhelming desire to learn about how the tools worked rather than the decisions about why they should use them.

Time poor staff had little time to engage with the programme on a full-time basis. In addition, their attention waned if the programme went on for too long or the material did not match their expectations.

Yet another challenge was that it took some staff a lot of time to get up to speed with the LMS's interface and tools thus creating frustration and reducing the amount of time they spend engaged with the material.

The final challenge was to promote transfer of the learning experience back to their own course and teaching practice. In this regard, the professional learning experience had to be relevant to their own needs and suitable across a number of educational contexts.

Solutions to the challenges

To change the mindset that e-learning is an add-on, examples of how e-learning activities can be included in pedagogical activities are emphasised and participants are encouraged to share their experiences with e-learning in both distance and internal delivery modes. In this sense, the participants become an important resource to support and scaffold each other's learning.

Staffs' desire to learn about the technical use of tools is neutralized by providing them with an electronic user guide. Staff who are interested in the technical aspects of the tools are encouraged to consult the user guide which contains information on how to use all of the LMS's tools. This approach encourages the participants to ask questions and share experiences that are focused on the educational aspects of e-learning rather than the technical know-how associated with particular tools.

After a lot of refining the programme is now 3 weeks in length. The programme facilitators are assigned participants (mentees) who they arrange weekly appointments (touch-base sessions) with. A pre-course questionnaire helps the facilitators determine the amount of the experience, technical competency and the key reasons why the participants have enrolled in the course. This information in combination with the weekly touch-base sessions allows the facilitators to direct the participants to material that they feel is best suited to their needs.

In order to get all participants up to speed on the LMS's tools and the interface an orientation week is held prior to the programme commencing. The orientation week allows staff to practice with the tools that will be used in the programme and to help with the navigation of the LMS. Ultimately this allows staff to engage with the programme's material rather than having to learn about e-learning and the tools concurrently. It also encourages staff that are uncomfortable with technology to feel less self-conscious about their technology competencies once the programme begins.

Finally, to promote high road transfer, participants are encouraged to focus on a specific tool or e-learning activity that they intend to incorporate in their own teaching. The goal is to encourage staff to commit to one pedagogical change and to nurture a willingness to innovate, rather than train them how to use e-learning through a 'one stop shop' course.

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